SEXUAL POLITICS IN VIDEO GAMES: A *LEAGUE OF LEGENDS* CASE STUDY

A Thesis
by
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Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies
at Appalachian State University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
MASTER OF ARTS

December 2020
Department of English

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DECEMBER 2020

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Abstract

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Despite decades of technological and social advancement, video games continue to support discourse of the heterosexual white male at the expense of marginalized individuals and their experiences. "Sexual Politics in Video Games" builds upon previous scholarship regarding aesthetic representations and identity formation using one of the most popular video games, *League of Legends* (*League*), as a case study. Specifically, I ask: How should games acknowledge differing existences? How does representation and identification impact gameplay? How is identification formed during streaming? How does viewer-identity influence gameplay? How do viewer-identities interact and coexist? and What does this mean moving forward? The first and second chapter of this project highlights the field and provides a review of scholarship regarding video games, history, and identification/representation. In the third chapter, I provide a brief history of video games and I offer an analysis of representation through character backgrounds in *League*'s lore. In the fourth chapter, I provide insight into how coded interactions and

in-game representations impact a player's identification. In the final chapter of this project, I discuss a brief history of eSports, how community identities are formed, how those identities interact with League's gameplay, and what the larger implications are for eSports.

Acknowledgments

Foremost, I am deeply indebted to Dr. Kyle Stevens for not only introducing me to cultural studies but for also believing in me. I never fully understood the passion for academia that scholars often talk about until I met Dr. Stevens. He continues to inspire my growth as a person and an academic. I simply could not have asked for a better or more patient mentor, advisor, and committee director.

I also wish to thank Dr. Craig Fischer and Dr. Leonardo Flores. Dr. Fischer consistently offered invaluable assistance and advice during the formations of this project. He played a fundamental role in providing me direction in both this project and in future projects. Meanwhile, Dr. Flores has provided unparallel support for myself and my peers. His guidance has led to the successful completion of this endeavor. Just as I could not have asked for a better committee director, I truly believe this is best committee I could ask for.

I would be in remiss if I did not thank Dr. David Orvis. While he is no longer on my committee, he has served in a similar fashion of other committee members. He proved instrumental in my decision to pursue higher education and his unwavering support cannot be understated. He has proven to not only offer educational advice but also emotional support in times of need.

Finally, I cannot begin to express my thanks to Tracie for her patience during the writing of this project. Not only did she prove fundamental in checking my sanity, but she also graciously provided practical suggestions and constructive criticism.

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What is (Video) Game Studies Anyway?

The justification for game studies as a worthy subject of academic study has long been settled (Aarseth 2001; Mäyrä 2008; Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al. 2016). Instead of justifying the study of video games, this introductory section is meant to provide clear definitions, when possible, and illuminate ongoing discussions concerning the subject matter here within. The purpose of this is two-fold. First, it is important to explore key terminology that is used differently in other disciplines or in other contexts. Second, even within game studies, definitions are malleable and often change drastically from one scholar to the next. The multi and interdisciplinary nature of game studies only increases the issue of various definitions and the need for concrete definitions.

There is no better place than to start with the definition of "game studies." Outside of the obvious, unhelpful "study of games," Frans Mäyrä states, "*game studies is a multidisciplinary field of study and learning with games and related phenomena as its subject matter*" (Mäyrä 6, original emphasis). Mäyrä continues by arguing that the inclusion of every theoretical definition is impossible if we base it on the possible definitions presented. In keeping the definition broad, the field is able to include analog and virtual games for analysis, apply different theoretical approaches for "learning" purposes, and provide flexibility in defining what a "game" is since they "can be several different things" (Mäyrä 10). However, this flexibility denies any attempt in understanding what a "game" is or may become.

Scholars have attempted to define "game" and what it means to "play" since before the formation of the field. Roger Callois provides a foundational definition in "play" as an activity which is essentially "Free" and voluntary in participation, "separate" in time and

space from reality, "uncertain" and therefore having an unknown outcome, "unproductive" in a sense of having zero material goods created, "governed by rules" that are specifically different than previously established legislation, and, finally, that which is "make believe" by situating the event against real life, typically, through a second reality (9-10). Callois codifies forms of play in distinct categories (*Agon, Alea, Mimicry, Ilinx*) that fit along a spectrum between playfulness (*Paidia*) and a set of rules (*Ludus*). Much of the key terminology in Callois' definition of play is located elsewhere in game studies. For instance, Johan Huizinga's foundational concept of the "magic circle" argues that games and play occur in a separate reality that contains the rules of the game.

While both Callois and Huizinga are often cited in game studies scholarship for these specific definitions, there is a general consensus that these definitions lack specificity. This lack of specificity allows for games to be categorized in multiple ways under Callois' system, and so it becomes a system that has no clear defining lines because every game can make up the majority of categories. Huizinga also shares a similar issue of simplicity. The concept of the "magic circle," as discussed in Chapter 3 of this thesis, denies an extension of game outside of the context of play. Notions of the "magic circle" can be compared to the New Criticism from literary theory that argues text is self-referential, but, as Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al. argues, "in game studies today, magic circle arguments are often treated with suspicion or seen as primarily applicable on a strictly formalist level of analysis" (35). Despite this assertion, it is important not to conflate suspicion with a formalist approach. Within game studies, the argument between narratologists (Henry Jenkins, Janet Murray) and ludologists (Espen Aarseth, Jesper Juul, Ian Bogost, Eric Zimmerman), that is the study of representation and narrative versus the study of game-defining rules, has helped shape the field of game

studies by interrogating various definitions and methods of study. Importantly, Espen Aarseth helped create the study of game-defining rules in their key-book *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature* (1997). Aarseth was the first scholar to argue that video games demand a user-mediated feedback loop that has become a staple in most "game" definitions.

Jesper Juul defines games in *Half-real: Video Games between Real Rules and Fictional Worlds* (2005) as "A rule-based formal system;" "with variable and quantifiable outcomes;" where different outcomes are assigned different values;" "where player exerts effort in order to influence the outcome;" "the player feels emotionally attached to the outcome;" and "the consequences of the activity are optional and negotiable" (20). While Juul's definition mirrors previous definitions that emphasize the importance of rules, outcome, and negotiability their definition highlights the players role in the event. Despite the addition of the player's perspective even this definition is not applicable to all games. In terms of video games, Juul's definition excludes massively multiplayer online games and other open-world games like *World of Warcraft* or *Dungeons and Dragons Online*. In this genre of games, gameplay is determined by the player with no definitive end. While most games have "end-game" content, the form that content is presented in is usually through repeatable quests for characters at max level. There is no traditional concept of "beating" the game that other games provide because goals are ever shifting. New content is released for games in forms like expansions in *World of Warcraft* that require constant replay to attain new cosmetics or weapons, or a player's desire to advance their in-game guild renown as in *Dungeons and Dragons Online* that unlock temporary in-game bonuses. However, other game genres may roll a credit screen to signify the completion of a storyline.

The importance from understanding the evolution of definitions, as Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al. posit, is that "it is more important to acknowledge and specify one's own definition than it is to try to decide on the 'correct' one" (49). For this reason, Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman's definition of a game is sufficient for the discussion within the context of this thesis. They define game "as [a] system in which players engage in an artificial conflict, defined by rules, that results in a quantifiable outcome" (11). This definition provides enough inclusivity so most games meet the requirements while allowing flexibility in understanding what "system" is being used and how conflicts might be "artificial." One clarification is required, however. "System," colloquially, refers to the technical machine video games are often played on. A standard question between players is "what system do you own/play on?" and responses vary from the Nintendo Switch, Xbox, PlayStation, or the computer. However, in terms of definition, "system" does not refer to the specific console a game is played on but rather it refers to the networked formal, experiential, and cultural situation that is made from interaction (Salen and Zimmerman).

Until now, we have interrogated various definitions of games and how they are played. While Salen and Zimmerman illuminate the reciprocal relationship between games and play in *Rules of Play* (2003), we have yet to include definitions that define the "video" aspect of video games. Video games are primarily interacted with by a player through a screen (television or computer) and the use of a peripheral device (mouse/keyboard or remote). However, the advent of technology has made these generalizations immediately false. Handheld devices (GameBoy, Nintendo Switch, Mobile gaming) often provide their own screens. Meanwhile virtual reality gaming headsets introduce their own screens that provides a different experience than other consoles. So, to argue that the "video" of video

games simply signifies a screen or use of advanced technology does nothing in defining the modifier "video" impacts the game outside of the visual. Salen and Zimmerman posit there are four primary traits of digital gaming.[1] They claim digital games provide immediate but narrow feedback, the manipulation of information, an automated complex system, and networked communication.

In order to fully understand these traits, it may be best to analyze them through example. Popular first-person shooter franchise *Call of Duty* (*CoD*) exemplifies various traits depending on the moment of gameplay. The controls provide instant feedback based on the player's input which satisfies the first trait. When the player presses the "fire" button which signifies the user attempting to shoot their weapon in game, the immediate feedback includes corresponding audio and visual representations associated with the action. This manipulation of data that follows the game rules, that is the "firing" of the weapon through coded interactions, satisfies the second trait. This example also satisfies trait number three of an automated complex system. The game transcends a mock-battle or even LARPing and transforms into a more complex system where players do not have to monitor the rules themselves.[2] In the example of a *CoD* player "firing" their weapon, the game manipulates the data appropriately without further user interaction, demand, or moderation. Finally, *CoD* is designed for both single and multiplayer. Not every game, as Salen and Zimmerman highlight, is meant for networked communication, but the games that are allow for communication between players. This communication, as discussed in Chapter 3, comes in

[1] "Digital Gaming" is an alternative term for video gaming.
[2] LARP stands for Live-action role playing. For ease of reference, *Role Models* (2008) starring Paul Rudd and Sean William Scott portrays LARPing. Generally, LARPers partake in a fantastical setting in a defined area. Within their "magic-circle" the roleplaying is determined by their choice of setting. In *Role Models*, they engage in an imagined high fantasy setting whose rules dictate customs, courtesies, and rules of battle. The important part is LARPing only works if players self-patrol the rules. There is no outside governing body, typically.

all forms from text to character model manipulation and dynamic interpretation. Model manipulation and subsequent interpretations are often done through considering game mechanics.

Mary Flanagan defines mechanics as "the phantasm of game rules that produce the emergence of game play" (266). Returning to the *CoD* example above, this means the "fire" option is a mechanic within the game to bring forth the dynamics of the game. Flanagan posits that players "formulate meaning through actions … and these actions become agency in games" (266). Despite this, a large amount of scholarship discusses the importance of mechanics from a game designer's perspective and not from the players. The players only matter when considering how the game should have been created. Chris Swain identifies "a generic core mechanic in all games that can be described as (a) player makes a choice, (b) system responds to that choice, (c) repeat" (218). Both Swain and Flanagan identifies a core concept in mechanics despite the difference in rhetoric: gameplay is determined through player-game interaction and sometimes, when the video game is multiplayer, through the player-game-player interaction.

So, to return to the titular question of this chapter, what is video game studies anyways? To summarize, it is the study of a digital artifact that is: constrained by a set of rules, occurs in an imaginary, alternate reality, provides immediate, uninterrupted feedback that users find meaning with through the artifact's mechanics. However, this summary can also be critiqued despite including the most common requirements from every definition. Returning to Mäyrä's original point, video games can be "several different things," so video game studies is the study of those several different things. In the case of this thesis, it is the study of representation and identification in the artifact of *League of Legends*.

Another way to consider the study of games is through procedural rhetoric. Ian Bogost defines "procedural rhetoric" in *Persuasive Games* (2007) as "the practice of persuading through processes in general and computational processes in particular" (3). While Bogost delineates the relationship between procedure and rhetoric in their book, they also advocate that video games are: predisposed to allow procedural rhetorics, "uniquely, consciously, and principally crafted as expressions," and interactive (45). Ultimately, "procedural rhetoric" in video games is notable because of the inherent symbolic manipulation by the rule-based aspect of games as users interact with the artifact.

There remains one final definition worth considering: "genre." While not necessarily imperative to this thesis, game studies scholars have a similar issue as Callois in defining game genres. Colloquially, there are idiosyncratic usages of genre within video games. Gamestop, *Game Informer*, and other popular hubs for video game players often offer classifications of games. However, these usages are not always uniform not all-encompassing. Generally, defining genre in game studies has proven fruitless as the classifications are either too broad and unhelp or hyper specific and require too many genres to make the system worthwhile. Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al. proposes four general genre categories:

> Action Games: "often intense and usually involve fighting or some kind of physical drama" (i.e. *Pac-Man* (1980), *Red Dead Redemption* (2010), and *Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time* (2003)) (56)
>
> Adventure Games: "are entirely devoid of fighting and of action sequences; sometimes they even lack the risk of the main character dying. To succeed the player

must exhibit skills of logic and deduction" (i.e. *Dreamfall: The Longest Journey* (2006), *Baldur's Gate* (1998)) (56)

Strategy Games: "The most common form is perhaps a game of war, but rather than the player being on the battlefield … she takes on the distant role of general" (i.e. *Dune II* (1992) and *Warcraft* (1994)) (57)

Process-Oriented Games: Games that are designed without a set end-goal for users (i.e. *World of Warcraft* (2004)) (57)

However, even within these definitions, readers may notice similar trends between definitions. For instance, while *Baldur's Gate* is classified as an adventure game, its battlefield control revolves around turn-based strategy that is a trait of the strategy game genre. Action and adventure games are also hard to distinguish from another because each user experience is different. In an example of overspecification, Mark J. P. Wolf's *The Medium of the Video Game* (2001) identifies over 40 forms of genre to consider. More recently, Juan J. Vargas-Igelsias proposes an alternative to a rigidly-defined genre system. In "Making sense of genre: The logic of videogame genre organization" (2020) Vargas-Iglesias proposes a model that allows flexibility in defining genre through a greater understanding of proposed fundamental set of relations. Just as with the defining "game," there is no agreed upon terminology or definitions for "genre" within game studies.

This chapter illuminates and explores various definitions of "game" and "mechanics." I could not simply provide a concrete definition because one does not exist within the field yet. Instead, I have highlighted a few important moments in the field in defining the term "game" so that readers of this thesis will have a greater understanding of the artifact in

question. Then, I briefly interrogated the term "mechanic" because, while not explicit, it is important to understand this concept for Chapter 3.

The second chapter provides a review of the scholarship while the third chapter of this project provides a brief history of video games, defines our case study in *League of Legends* (*League*), and provides a basic level analysis on gendered aesthetics based on the video game's use of background and lore information. In this chapter, I am taking a narratologist's argument of analyzing the meaning-making that occurs because of the lore behind each character in *League*.[3] An important distinction must be made concerning aesthetics in game studies. Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al. argues that aesthetics refers to "all aspects of video games which are experienced by the player, whether directly – such as audio and graphics – or indirectly – such as rules. Thus, importantly aesthetics as used here is not limited to how a game looks or sounds but more broadly to how it *plays* as a function of various design choices" (121, original emphasis). The "MDA model" developed by Robin Hunicke et al. supports this more general application of aesthetics. They argue that, from a design perspective, aesthetics "describes the desirable emotional responses evoked in the player, when they interact with the game system" (2). This model does not eliminate the inclusion of rules because the focus of aesthetics is on the interaction – the emotional response – between player and game.

The fourth chapter of this thesis departs from the traditional analysis of strict textual representation and focuses on sexual identification between player and character as the game mechanics allow and even promote. I posit that game mechanics align with the game's

[3] It is worth mentioning that there is a distinction between "avatar" and "character." The use of avatar specifically implies a relationship of *self*-representation between the player and the player-controlled (and normally created) entity. Avatar is never applicable within this thesis unless clearly stated because *League* uses specific terminology when referring to their characters that extends throughout this project.

representation of marginalized demographics as discussed in chapter three. Then, I analyze metagame mechanics such as voice, metaprograms used, and other utilities that may inhibit or promote identification and disidentification. I also extend traditional analysis of identification towards players being identified by other players within the context of the game through stereotypes and/or mechanics of the game.

The fifth and final chapter of this project interrogates popular streaming platforms like Twitch and YouTube. First, however, I outline the meteoric rise of eSports and streaming by providing the history of each. Then, I analyze the relationship between the developers, content creators, and viewers through *League*-sponsored content. The key arguments revolve around community formation and how individual communities impact gameplay. With the formation of communities, there is also the potential for alternative or conflicting notions of identification amongst players. Finally, I posit that professional games differ than the game they mimic and, separately, current gendered discrimination will continue without serious reconsideration of how streaming and eSports operates.

History and Representations on Video Games: A Review of Scholarship

Video games have impenetrated our society. The constant "gamification" of everyday activities only helps promote and familiarize people with gaming. Within recent years, video games have become an accepted academic point of analysis. Multiple disciplines interrogate video games for both empirical data and on the applicability of theoretical models. This review, as well as this thesis, focuses on the application of theoretical models concerning representation and identification in video games, but also with an eye towards interrogating those models. It is also important to understand the context of the artifact being used as a case study, *League of Legends* (*League*), within the history of video games and electronic sports (eSports).

Historical and Foundational Text

Two central texts in video game scholarship are Simon Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al.'s *Understanding Video Games: The Essential Introduction* (2016) and Frans Mäyrä's *An Introduction to Game Studies: Games in Culture* (2008). Both books act as introductory textbooks to the field by providing a brief history of scholarship, a history of video games, and introducing often interrogated elements of video games like aesthetics, narratives, definitions, and possible areas of investigation moving forward. Since these books cover a vast majority of topics, topics that could likely be extended into a book in their own right, their baseline historical information is expanded upon in other texts but Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al. and Mäyrä's contributions should not be overlooked.

Steven L. Kent's *The Ultimate History of Video Games: From Pong to Pokemon – The Story Behind the Craze That Touched Our Lives and Changed the World* (2001) details the early stages of video game history until the late 1990s. Kent provides a unique experience

that other historical accounts are not likely to capture which is a plethora of statements from key figureheads throughout the industry during the creation of specific games. In this sense, Kent provides more than just a strict historical account, but rather he creates a text that provides insight into the cultural moments surrounding the events that formed games and gaming. While not an academic source, Netflix's streaming series *High Score* provides a similar historical account. This docu-series provides recorded interviews of people who were present during the early formation of video games. The World Video Game Hall of Fame also supports much of Kent's bibliography and *High Score*'s historical account in *A History of Video Games in 64 Objects* (2018), but they extend their research an additional seventeen years compared to Kent's. Video games change frequently and those additional seventeen years saw rapid technological advancements, globalization of video games, and an interest in competitive video games. One of the failings of these texts is the hyper specificity on games deemed important and a lack of scope outside of the United States and, in small measure, the Japanese consumer market.

Mark J.P. Wolf's anthology *Video Games Around the World* (2015) addresses this concern through an interesting collection of articles from scholars around the world. While this thesis is primarily focused on the United States/North American market because that is where Riot Games, developer of *League*, is based, Wolf's historical accounts for missing information regarding the advancement of video games elsewhere provides imperative information concerning the spread of games. However, despite this acknowledgement of a market outside of the United States, Wolf's anthology also does not acknowledge an interest in eSports.

The rise of eSports is a relatively new phenomenon. eSports is generally accepted to be defined as "competitive video game play." While Alex Hope points out that eSport tournaments have been around since 1981, they are quick to admit that the next twenty years remained relatively quiet concerning eSports. There are likely many reasons eSports did not develop during this time. First, the technological constraints prohibited massive tournaments. It was not until 2000 when large organizations were formed with the intention of video game tournaments (Hope). The second major reason eSports did not advance is likely because of the sociality of the arcade. As discussed briefly in the next chapter, the arcade era revolved around individual stores and localized gameplay. While localized, non-networked tournaments were certainly possible, the video game industry primarily focused on creating more video games and advancing the field over the idea of eSports. Hope's "The Evolution of the Electronic Sports Entertainment Industry and its Popularity" also briefly details the history of eSports. Hope asserts that "the game *League of Legends* by Riot Games has been a driving force behind the promotion of electronic sports," so it is only natural that *League*'s eSports scene mirrors the rise of eSports in trajectory (88). Most other research revolving around the history of eSports is spent defining the term "eSports," justifying eSport's existence in relation to more traditional sports or comparing eSport fans to traditional sport fans.

Representation and Identification

The primary focus of this thesis is the multifaceted interactions between video games and representation/identification. While an understanding of the historical context of games may highlight key moments of representation and identification, such as Ryan Best's *GayBlade* (1992), which was the "The World's First Gay & Lesbian Computer Game"

(Costrel), this thesis is focused more on the interactions between contemporary text and its players. Adrienne Shaw highlights in *Gaming at The Edge* (2014) that users are likely to ignore matters of representation or ignore the game entirely if they do not find their experience represented within the game. Through this conceptualization, there is a shift in focus from representation in the traditional, demographic way, to understanding the representation of the individual in all forms of intersectionality.

As Richard Dyer argues in *White* (1997), "someone may be black *and* gay *and* middle class *and* female" but not necessarily any combination of these intersectionalities (3, original emphasis). They also assert that traditional notions of identities are being separated, yet video games, over 20 years later, still denies this separation as evident through a lack of intersectionality. Shaw highlights this discrepancy as not only a lack of intersectionality but they emphasize the real meaning behind the issue. For Shaw, the issue is not enough representation of a specific demographic, the problem is the exclusion of relatable experiences. In similar thought as Gaye Tuchman's "symbolic annihilation," Shaw argues that this exclusion fails to recognize the existence of intersectionality and thus denies existences of players. That is to say, a video game's failure to acknowledge "someone [who] may be black *and[/or]* gay *and[/or]* middle class *and[/or]* female" fails to recognize the possibility of existence of all or any intersecting traditional demographics. Jesse Fox and Wai Yen Tang also recognize that players are likely to withdraw from games where inclusivity is an issue while also demonstrating that the lack of inclusivity often results in harassment from those who are included.

Shaw continues discussing the importance of a player being able to "identify *as*" or "identify *with*" a character model. Specifically, Shaw defines them as:

> Identification *as*: "a process by which we come to feel an affective connection with a character on the basis of seeing that character as separate and yet a part of us in some way." (Shaw Loc 1797-1806)
>
> Identification *with*: is when "people see that what they are identifying with as separate from themselves" (Shaw Loc 1551)

These definitions are not dissimilar from Ragnhild Tronstad's "sameness identity" and "empathic identity" which are defined as:

> Sameness Identity: "being identical to," or an "identification with one's character … as the player enter[s] a state where [they] ha[ve] an experience of 'being' the character." (Tronstad 251)
>
> Empathic Identity: having "empathy" with a character," or "identification may be understood as experiencing what the character experiences, but without the feeling of being identical to it – that is, with a consciousness of the character as an entity other than ourselves, but with which we can identify." (Tronstad 251)

There are clear connections between Tronstad's "sameness identity" and "empathic identity" with Shaw's "identification as" and "identification with." Specifically, "sameness identity" and "identification as" relies upon the player's sense of identification of themselves with the object. "Empathic identity" and "identification with" are moments of identification in which the player's sense of identification is separated, by them, from the object in relation to them. These definitions are expanded upon and interrogated through *League* in chapter four of this thesis. One of the information gaps that exists in current scholarship is how players identify other players through character model manipulation and how the tension created with that form of identification does not align with self-identification or self-identity. This tension is

only exaggerated when eSports and streaming form an additional layer of interpretation for players to identify other players. This theoretical gap will be covered in chapter five of this thesis.

Many scholars have interrogated the educational benefits of video games (Dimitra et al.; Marín-Díaz; Seidel; Shliakhovchuk and Garcia). Ian Bogost highlights the power of video games as they are modeled after experiences rather than a simple photograph or message. So, students would be able to experience a similar event as the studied event opposed to instruction through a singular textbook-image. The virtual reality project *Arena y Carne* (2017) by Alejandro G. Iñárritu exemplifies 'lived-experience' over seeing an image for educational purposes. *Arena y Carne* participants are placed in a space that mirrors the struggle of Mexican and Central American refugees immigrating to the United States. The experiential simulation provides a "day-in-the-life-of" understanding through immersive technology. Generally, the idea follows Bogost's assumptions that experience provides greater context and understanding compared to an image or story. However, Carlos de Aldama and Juan-Ignacio Pozo assert that video games only provide educational benefit when framed as such.

While it is generally agreed upon that video games do provide educational benefits, there has been dissent regarding the educational use of video games in terms of representation. Elena Shliakhovchuk and Adolfo Muñoz García argue that "video games offer freedom from previously fixed belief systems, stereotypical cultural association and racial bias" (50). One of the larger questions regarding educational use of video games may stem from cultivation theory. Cultivation theory refers to the notion that the longer a user interacts with television, and in this case, video games, the more likely users expect reality to

match what they see on their screen. de Aldama and Pozo assert that the freedom Shliakhovchuk and Muñoz García highlights must be properly framed. Otherwise, as Greg Blackburn and Erica Scharrer argue, cultivation theory might impress hegemonic stereotypes upon their users. However, there has been some conflicting research regarding the applicability of cultivation theory in videogames. Johannes Bruer et al. find that there is no significant correlation between violence and video games nor sexism and video games through the lens of cultivation theory. They suggest two likely reasons. First, outside factors, like personal experiences and family, influence video game players. Second, they argue gaming experiences always vary between players. Differing experiences makes the application of a generalized theory difficult and, possibly, unreliable.

Despite this incongruity, the game-player relationship is important to consider because video games inform people as early as adolescence of socially-supported stereotypes (Liu). Helen Liu found that trends among the studied adolescents mirrored aspects of social cognitive theory. Specifically, Liu detailed how participants accepted representation in sport games because the games mirrored reality. In games where the participants identified moments of problematic representation, male participants did not "deem [it] problematic enough to warrant change" where female participants argued otherwise (35).

Since social cognitive theory suggests that behavior is impacted through self-efficacy, reciprocal determinism, behavioral capability, observational learning, reinforcement, and expectations, streaming and eSports are also worthy of consideration concerning educational impact on viewers and players. Joon Soo Lim et al. argue that viewers are likely to encounter observational learning, reinforcement, and expectations through watching a stream. They also posit that streamers likely encounter self-efficacy and behavioral capability. Since

reciprocal determinism is the centerpiece of social cognitive theory, both streamer and viewers' actions may be impacted by their learned experiences and social context. Ultimately, they argue that emotional engagement and wishful identification, that is the desire of an individual to attempt to become like another person (Cynthia Hoffner and Martha Buchanan), strengthens streamer-viewer relationships as experienced through the mediated reality of the stream.

A significant amount of scholarship interrogating sexist or stereotypical images in video games exists. Scholars agree that meaningful representations of females are often underrepresented in video games. This critique does not only exist in the academic world. Popular media critic Anita Sarkeesian co-founded Feminist Frequency which is a non-profit educational organization. Feminist Frequency publishes podcasts, YouTube videos, and other media that critiques media sensations including tv-shows, video games, and movies. More pointedly, female representations are often sexualized, overshadowed by male counterpart representations, and/or neglected entirely. Keiko M. McCullough et al. found a positive correlation between video game play and internalized misogyny in women. They also drew connections between this positive correlation and a decreased positive feminist identity. They concluded that females with a higher sense of feminist identity are "protected" from internalized misogyny when playing video games (274).

The internalized misogyny may be a byproduct of diversity for diversity's sake. Shaw posits in *Gaming at the Edge* that diversity is typically done for an increased profitability in attracting a new demographic. Further, they argue that most instances of diversity for diversity's sake often produce surface-level stereotyped characters without providing real diversity. Shaw argues in "Putting the Gay in Games" that representation comes "in time"

but only when developers and stakeholders "actively invest in their creation" (229). However, they identify that if representation is relegated "to the realm of independent game developers [it] could result in a ghettoization of content" (248). Shaw draws the potential ghettoization with that of the "girl games market." Within this context, games were developed with "girl gamers" as the targeted audience, so developers created a subgenre of games that appeal to stereotypes of gendered play. Developers focused on what might entice "girl gamers" instead of focusing on aspects of games that already enticed female players.

Previous research also focused heavily on the gendered atmosphere game culture produces. Two primary reasons this culture was originally fostered is the lack of representational inclusivity in early video games (Cassell and Jenkins; Malkowski and Russworm) and the exclusivity geek culture promoted before video games became their own culture (Salter and Blodgett; Malkowski and Russworm). Anastasia Salter and Bridget Blodgett highlight the hostility against females in the video game industry which promotes the marginalization of their identities. They continue arguing that this marginalization often extends to video games through the marginalization or complete invisibility of female characters. Finally, they posit that the "increasing presence of female gamers is met at the contentious boundary by pushing femininity to the outskirts of gaming spaces, thus reaffirming the role of masculine" (413). Salter and Blodgett extend their boundary analysis to argue that current game culture started as inherently problematic; video game culture stems from a stereotyped category of geek culture that was then expanded to include other demographics.

As discussed in chapter three, "bro culture" is still an issue throughout the video game industry. As T.L Taylor argues in an interview with the *American Journal of Play*,

"despite women being avid game players … they still face serious cultural barriers" that result in "having to work twice as hard to prove themselves, harassment, microaggressions, and not having full access to networks that would help them succeed" (113). Taylor clarifies that these issues exist in competitive and non-competitive play. Kruthika N.S. agrees and argues that gender discrimination may inhibit eSport's inclusion in any upcoming Olympic event. They identify possible benefits to include eSports in Olympic competition including how eSports: can transcend physical barriers, promote activism and fundraising, and can expand the Olympic audience to include a younger demographic. However, they detail how the masculine-centered culture of video games does not align with the International Olympic Committee's (IOC) diversity goal. While Kruthika N.S. supplies possible solutions to the IOC's requirements, like creating an all-female league, John T. Holden et al. argue that "change will likely need to begin with game-makers assuming responsibility" for the rampant sexism and other forms of discrimination (33). They also suggest that establishing a formal legal avenue for victims of sexual harassment could help promote needed changes. The only form of legal action that has occurred regarding harassment of players is in the new case of a professional South Korean team. T1 (formerly known as SK Telecom 1, or SKT), the team in *League* with the most world championship titles, has recently promised legal action against individuals harassing T1's players (Steven R.). While the forms of harassment are not identified, it is unlikely the harassment is based in sexual or gendered harassment given the masculine identity of the team. However, this does set the precedent of legal action being a possibility.

Conclusion

Generally, there seems to be a consensus on two major topics. First, definitions are not standardized in game studies as discussed in the introduction. Second, and more importantly, representations of marginalized groups are problematic. Not only do representations directly impact the audience through educational aspects, social cognitive theory, and perhaps cultivation theory, but scholarship also suggests that ongoing systemic issues are furthered through these representations. My thesis generally agrees with scholarship on this point and aligns with Adrienne Shaw's call for recognizing possible existences beyond hegemonic discourse.

I argue, however, that the matter of representation extends beyond traditional notions of aesthetics, that is to mean beyond physical qualities of the game. While my argument is applied to *League*, to my knowledge, I am providing an analysis of aesthetics as they interact with game mechanics that has rarely been done. Ultimately, I argue that games may, and in *League*'s case does, promote problematic discourse through the game's coded interactions that their physical representations mirrors. In turn, players are made complicit in the game's discourse.

Acknowledging how players identify and are identified by other players also proves useful and, as far as I can tell, has been minimally studied beyond physical in-game representations or in the formation of streaming communities. These methods of identification extend beyond *League* and into the realm of eSports. Not only is eSports naturally becoming more popular than it ever has been, but with ongoing issues regarding COVID-19, eSports is uniquely situated for exponential growth. Further studies may analyze COVID-19's impact on streaming but assessing identification by users and what that means for gameplay and streaming can be done now.

Representations in Video Games

A Little History

Representations matter. With each new medium that arises similar discussions occur regarding the importance of representations, and the video game is not an exception. Why do they matter? More importantly, *how* do they matter? What sort of meaning is being made through any given representation and by whom? There is no general consensus regarding the answers to these questions, but scholars have certainly debated possible answers. One of the more famous counter arguments to representation is the "magic circle" as inspired by John Huizinga's *Homo Ludens*. The "magic circle" is a concept that places the context of the game in a separate, alternate reality while denying interaction with reality. The game functions within this alternate reality where the rules define the context of that reality. It is important to note that our understanding of reality does not interfere with the game's newly created reality, and subsequently the game's reality does not intercede ours. For example, a popular method of movement in computer games is the WASD function. Each of these four keys correspond to the character/avatar on the screen. "W" moves the character/avatar forward, "A" moves the character/avatar left, "S" moves the character/avatar backwards, and "D" moves the character/avatar right, generally. However, outside of the context of the game these keys function differently like producing the corresponding letter on a word document or chat box. Within the context of the game and the "magic circle" the rules of the game supersede reality while our reality remains separate but intact. Concerning questions of representation Adrienne Shaw argues that "often, people who make excuses for not 'dealing' with issues of representation insist that these are fantasy worlds and should not be encumbered with reality" (Loc 3086). Similar to the functionality of the WASD key

bindings, the people Shaw refers to argues that matters of representation within the magic circle are not reflective of reality.

Simon Egenfeldt-Nielson provides an important clarification for when notions of the magic circle remains useful. They state, as described in the introductory chapter of this thesis, "in game studies today, magic circle arguments are often treated with suspicion or seen as primarily applicable on a strictly formalist level of analysis" (35). So, while the "magic circle" is not strictly applicable to every situation, a more formalist approach does provide context for the terminology. Specifically, Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman posit in *Rules of Play* that "the **magic circle** of a game is the space within which a game takes place. Whereas more informal forms of play do not have a distinct boundary" (7, original emphasis). Under a more formalist approach, the "magic circle" exists when considering rules-as-analysis. However, in terms of representation, Mia Consalvo recognizes:

> Structures may be necessary to begin gameplay, but we cannot stop at structures as a way of understanding the gameplay experience. Because of that, we cannot say that games are magic circles, where the ordinary rules of life do not apply. Of course they apply, but in addition to, in competition with, other rules and in relation to multiple contexts, across varying cultures, into different groups, legal situations, and homes. (416)

Here, Consalvo illuminates the intersectionalities of the realities. They recognize the formalist approach as a necessity to enter the game, but they irrefutably reject notions regarding a "closed" relationship as discussed by Salen and Zimmerman. Importantly, Consalvo's perspective allows for the realities, both the real and temporary as created/defined by the game, to coexist. This coexistence allows a few things. Primarily, it

allows for the overlapping of realities. In terms of representations, a game's aesthetics may reflect representations of our culture. Even if a game defies a standard representation, for example – having a soldier-character in *Call of Duty* wear bright red cargo shorts would defy the traditional imagery of a soldier, those aesthetics are still "in addition to, in competition with, other rules and in relation to multiple context(s)." Allowing the *Call of Duty* player their bright red cargo shorts allows for the possibility to exist. Despite tactical reasons for the occurrence to never happen, it is a possibility even if an unlikely one. As Adrienne Shaw states: "representation provides evidence for what forms of existence are possible" (Shaw Loc 161). Denying the possibilities of certain existences in support of fantasy only supports hegemonic discourse. However, as Shaw argues in "Putting the Gay in Games," representation comes "in time" with every new medium as "certain stakeholders actively invest in their creation" (Shaw 229). Before we begin discussing why, how, and when representation matters, we must first determine where "in time" we are culturally situated.

The first commercially successful video game, *Pong*, was developed in 1972 (Mäyrä 41). Its success is heavily reliant on its accessibility as an arcade-style game and whose simplicity allows for users to engage with the game without any prerequisite knowledge (World Video). While Nolan Bushnell is credited with the invention of *Pong*, there remains debate among video game historians concerning its conception (Kent; World Video). Ralph Baer, designer of the first console system the Magnavox Odyssey, took Bushnell to court regarding the rights to *Pong*. Baer argued that Bushnell violated several patents including a ping-pong-based game. Eventually, the two parties settled outside of court. Bushnell's Atari

became Magnavox's sole licensee.[4,5] Atari would continue as a premier video game company until the early to mid-1990s. Steven L. Kent argues, "Atari establish[ed] itself as the most diverse and prolific coin-operated video game company in history" (89). Since 1972, Atari developed multiple games that are now considered classics including: *Breakout* (1976), *Asteroids* (1979), *Missile Command* (1980), *Centipede* (1989), and others.

During this time, Gary Gygax's *Dungeons and Dragons* prospered. Gygax's table-top roleplaying game defined mechanics that are still used in today's video games. Hit Points (or health), experience points, character races, classes, and other customizable options were all defined within *Dungeons and Dragons* (World Video; Costrel). This table-top game led to the invention of role-playing video games (RPGs). Customization is one of the defining features of RPGs, and it is this customization that plays an integral part in understanding the evolution of representation in video games. Early video games often consisted of a playable "character" in the form of either a spaceship or predetermined character. However, RPGs in the video game medium continues to provide the greatest affordance in representation compared to any game genre. Ryan Best took this concept in 1992 and created *GayBlade* as a form of protest against anti-homosexual rhetoric (Costrel*). GayBlade*, as Best argues in Netflix's *High Score*, is "The World's First Gay & Lesbian Computer Game" (Costrel).

The next step in video game history is the introduction of video game tournaments via *Spacewar!*, a popular game set in space. Months after *Pong* was created, *Rolling Stone* writer

[4] There will be significant missing entries to this history like *The Oregon Trail* (1971) and *Computer Space* (1971) will be left out despite its creation possibly creating the "PC Bangs" around the world (Wolf 601). However, these missing entries are not necessarily relevant to the inception of *League*, our main case study, nor the evolution of representation in video games.

[5] "Video Games" existed before *Pong*. "Tennis for Two" is one example, but the game was not mass produced. The game also ran on the "images [that] were displayed using an oscilloscope-a lab instrument that displays the waveform of electronic signals," but "Tennis for Two" is certainly *Pong*'s predecessor (The Strong 6). So, technically, "Tennis for Two" was not a video game but it functioned similar to one.

Steward Brand reported on a "burgeoning computer community," and he believed that the best way was to introduce the nation to the "ultimate hacker game" was through a large-scale video game tournament (World Video 39). This coverage of *Spacewar!* was a first regarding video games, and this momentous occasion set the precedent for all of eSports (Schlosser).[6]

The next thirteen years saw the production of now-known classics such as *Space Invaders* (1978), *Asteroids* (1979), *Pac-Man* (1980), and *Donkey Kong* (1981). During this time, Namco, a Japanese video game distributer, entered the American video game scene through a partnership with Midway. Toru Iwatani created *Pac-Man* under the Namco brand with the purpose of creating a "nonviolent game, something female players might enjoy" (Kent 166). Iwatani succeeded in this goal. Arcades prospered during the early 1980s, but a couple of hackers wanted to make the games more difficult. Doug Macrae and Kevin Curran, two MIT students, led a small group of students who would modify gameboards. This group of "hackers" would start a company called General Computer.[7] They would sell their modifications for an upmarket price of $265 per board (Kent 195). Eventually, they created an enhancement for *Pac-Man*. Macrae and Curran were sued by Atari for copyright infringement, but instead of ordering a cease and desist, Atari took another settlement and hired Macrae and Curran. Before losing the chance, Macrae and Curran presented their modification to Midway and, eventually, their modification became *Mrs. Pacman* (1981). This was the first video game with a female protagonist.[8]

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[6] eSports stands for electronic sports. Similar to traditional sports, eSports consists of various competitive, professional leagues that revolve around different video games. Not every video game is in the eSports scene, but *League* is one of, if not the, largest.

[7] This type of hacking is different than today's cultural understanding. General Computer employees would take a part the video game and physically modify the equipment by inserting their own programmed device. This is opposite to today's cultural image of only modifying numbers and not requiring the change of hardware.

[8] *Metroid* (1986) is often touted as the first game to provide a playable female human protagonist.

The early to mid-1980s saw an immediate burst in investors and sales. Gerald "Jerry" Lawson is the engineer often credited towards with creating the "flexible" game cartridge (Joyner; Costrel). Before Dawson, a console could only play a single, designated game, but Dawson helped engineer the Channel F gaming console that allowed for interchangeable cartridges. This revolutionized the gaming community and is still important in today's gaming culture.[9] However, the increased production that resulted from consoles' compatibility with multiple cartridges led to a saturation of the U.S market, and eventually the market busted because of oversaturation (Costrel). This was the end of the arcade-style video games in the United States, and the saving grace for video games was Nintendo's Nintendo Entertainment System (NES) (1985) (Wolf 598; World Video 182).

The advancement of home consoles is only one technological advancement that accompanied the NES (Wolf). The ability to save game files followed the computer's floppy disk, the increased memory capacity for home/personal computers, and the invention of the CD-ROM, which allowed a faster processing speed and better graphics. Three-dimensional graphics became popular in the late 1980s for arcade-style games, but three-dimensional graphics were not the standard in home consoles until the early 1990s to date (Wolf 600).

The 1990s saw a rapid increase in video game development and interest. Long lasting franchises began during this decade, such as *Mortal Kombat* (1992) and *Pokémon* (1996), and while *World of Warcraft* would not be published until 2004 its predecessors, the *Warcraft* franchise, began publication a decade before. In the early 2000s, a "mod" was created for *Warcraft III*, a real-time strategy game. A "mod" is, generally, "a user modification of the source art, 3D characters, environment, or game engine" (Baldrica 681).

[9] There is a current trend of developers pushing towards strictly online digital games instead of a physical disc, but the capability of running multiple games on a single system still stems from Lawson's work.

In this case, the mod on *Warcraft III* became known as the *Defense of the Ancients*, or *DotA* and fundamentally changed the video game world.[10]

Before continuing with our main case study, I find it relevant to highlight my personal involvement with the object of analysis. Through much of game study scholarship, it has been asked whether scholars must play their artifact of analysis. This thesis is, in part, an autoethnographic study of *League of Legends* (*League*) as I have played and *League of Legends* (*League*) since 2013. Over the past 7 years, I have played thousands of games as various champions. I have also read the biographies of each character in their short-paragraph format, read every comic Riot Games released, and generally consumed all forms of official media related to the game. I mention this for multiple reasons. 1. With the deletion of the official *League* forum boards, it is – in part – a scholarly responsibility to archive culturally relevant games and I wish to do my part in preserving the history within this thesis. 2. I hope my anecdotal experiences provides some credibility in the moments in which I rely on non-scholarly sources. These sources are used because current game studies lack the thorough interrogation of *League* that would reveal much of this information. With that said, I have remained as objective as possible throughout my interrogation of *League* despite any emotional attachments, and I have erred on the side of criticism over leniency.

Creation of *League of Legends*

Before we begin analyzing the matter of representation and various methods of identification, it is important to tell the story of *League*'s evolution. In a 2019 interview, Marc Merrill, Co-Chairman and Co-Founder of Riot Games, admits that he and Co-Founder Brandon Beck "thought maybe [they] could build this sort of DOTA-style game," and thus,

[10] Kyle "Eul" Sommer, creator of the *DotA* mod, eventually sold rights to the game that would eventually become *DotA 2*.

League of Legends and the entire Multi-player Online Battle Arena (MOBA) genre was created (Crecente). Creating *League* was no small task for Merrill and Beck. Neither of them had a background in video game development, but they recognized a new marketing ploy that revolved around a free-to-play model game that would receive consistent updates over the traditional publishing of a game with free, continuous updates. They referred to this strategy as "game as a service" (Crecente). Their desire to maintain positive control over *League* led them to refuse publishers who likely wanted developmental control. They did not want to lose their "game as a service" concept to greed. However, after traveling the country securing financial support and fixing technical concerns, *League of Legends* finally launched October 27th, 2009 as a free-to-play video game. The game has maintained high levels of popularity since its inception. However, the increased popularity was not always a good thing for Riot Games. Merrill mentions that the game was almost shut down multiple times because of lack of funding, and he notes that "the number one reason people would stop playing *League of Legends* was because other people can be jerks online … That's not our fault, but that's our problem" (Crecente). In 2016, the company created an honor system to reward those who were not "jerks" and continue implementing measures to counter "toxic" players. Nevertheless, 2018 became arguably the most controversial time for Riot Games. Reports started leaking from Riot Games employees concerning the company's culture, and the game's representations of champion stereotypes was scrutinized.

In 2015, Tencent, a Chinese multinational conglomerate, bought Riot Games so they are the current owners. However, Riot Games still appears to maintain control over *League*'s creative design. Despite this change in proprietary status, not only is *League* consistently in the top five most played computer games around the world, often holding the number one

position, it also is within the top ten most-watched YouTube videos that are about video games ("Most Popular Core PC Games | Global;" Webb).

League currently has 151 champions that are playable each game. New champions are released or reworked every year. A normal game consists of 10 people in a five-versus-five scenario with the end goal of destroying the opposing team's base. The game lasts, on average 27-32 minutes, after which players may enter another queue and repeat the process (Game Durations). This genre differs from other well-established genres because it does not have a "progress saved" function and you lose all progress once a game is complete. Instead, each game starts with your champion having no items or experience. This continual reset creates a lack of narrative that would otherwise be found in a more conventional, or more linear, storytelling format seen in most video games. While this information is not integral to the game experience, players interested in a deeper lore can find information for each champion on the Riot Games' sponsored website.

***League*'s History in Representing Genders and Sexualities**

Stereotypes that permeate our social interactions have proven to be difficult, but not impossible, to change. Often, the consumable media, television, movies, video games, etc., broadly maintains awareness of the socio-political atmosphere and informs consumers through various representations of cultural movements. As a game that influences over 100 million players, the meaning-making through design and player interaction between *League* individual players is culturally significant (Volk). Within video games, the storylines and lore are often the most effective tools for game designers to support social progress, or they can be used to subvert stereotypes. Most games (*Fallout, Kingdom Hearts,* etc.) intertwine their storylines with character models/physical gameplay, but Riot Games opted not to incorporate

lore or biographical information into *League*'s gameplay. Instead, they have created a separate website that details the lore/biographies of each champion, information on all 12 regions of the imaginary world, Runeterra, that *League*'s lore resides in, comics about specific champions, and multiple alternate universes. This stringent disconnect between the intended lore and community perceptions creates a disjointed atmosphere concerning the reasons *why* certain champions are the way they are and the types or stereotypes they represent. While this allows players to create the narrative based on their personal experience, as opposed to the designer dictating lore, it also allows for that user-created reality to feed into the reality for all players.

This reliance on player-driven narrative, and in some cases fanfiction, has allowed Riot Games to reinforce problematic stereotypes regarding sexism, gender identity, and sexual orientation. This has caused the majority of biographies to seem shallow and plastic, as defined by Kristen Warner in "In the Time of Plastic Representation" as the "combination of synthetic elements put together and shaped to look like meaningful imagery, but which can only approximate depth and substance because ultimately it is hollow and cannot survive close scrutiny" (Warner).

Gender and Sexist Representations

Female champions make up thirty-six percent of *League*'s champion roster. This is a significant growth compared to the differing gender representations found in games from previous decades. Duggan's study reveals that the number of video game players between men and women are, in fact, equal (2). While gender is performative and not prescribed to a specific identity based on expressions, as Judith Butler famously argues, the narratology within *League* creates a diverse world in shape and stature. Many of the founding stories of

each champion proves to be hollow, or plastic, and problematic regarding the narrations around gender and sexism. For instance, the only obese humanoid is an alcoholic male, Gragas. The fact that Gragas has a "temperamental nature" and "the only thing more important to Gragas than fighting is drinking" further supports the stereotype that links masculinity, drinking, and violence (Champions: Gragas; The Aviary Recovery Center; Bogren). Without critiquing stereotypes of alcoholism, Gragas reinforces the misinformed player and cements the stereotypical image of an alcoholic to the masses. More importantly, Riot Games fails, as I will argue, in successfully critiquing issues regarding gender, race, and sexuality. This complete failure reinforces those same systemic issues.

While Gragas provides one problematic representation of the human male you would be hard pressed to find a non-sexualized female humanoid. With the exceptions of Annie, Neeko, and Zoe, all who are children, even the brawniest of females, Illaoi, are found in form-fitting attire highlighting their physiques. T. L. Dietz found that the majority of games "presented [women] as sex objects, or were depicted as contributing less than men" and *League* does nothing representationally or within its lore to suggest otherwise (Dietz 436). Some male champions are portrayed as possible sex objects. That is, they are shirtless or display muscles, but the majority are covered with armor. The portrayal of females as sex objects supports Albert Bandura's social cognitive theory where the (hyper)sexualization of the female champions significantly impacts a player's self-image particularly, but not exclusively, for female players. Essentially, when players continually see sexualized female champions, they internalize that as a norm and the requirement that must be met in order to be considered to be an object of desire. This internalization mirrors Laura Mulvey's "male" gaze" that refers to the frequent and normalized "masculine" positional framing (14).

Normally, individuals would learn these norms through social relations of what appropriate clothes and interactions are, but instead the portrayal of sexualized champions in video games often leads to an atypical view of female bodies.

When players of all genders observe these sexualized champions, they create a "cognitive structure, which is certainly connected to and affected (cathected) by emotion-inducing memories and conclusions" that influence "beliefs referring to the self and one's self-worth, and to information extracted from sociocultural influences" (López-Guimerà, et al. 405). Furthermore, a study conducted by Behm-Morawitz and Mastro in 2009 found that the sexualization of females in video games negate the inclusion of female champions that may have counter-stereotypical representational value (Cunningham 14). In *League*, that means despite Illaoi's obvious and stated physical prowess, she becomes a plastic representation. Her lore explicitly states that "it is where she has broken the traditions of her faith that speaks the most about her," referring to when she saved a region despite no other followers of her deity doing so before (Champions: Illaoi). However, the sexualization of females negate the importance of Illaoi's lore. Illaoi no longer happens to be female who accomplished something on her own, but her identity now revolves around being a female in the most stereotypical way. Also, within her lore, she breaks the heart of the "most bloodthirsty and infamous pirate," Gangplank (Champions: Illaoi). While the majority of *League*'s lore is separate from the physical game, the loading screen provides random tips for gameplay and information regarding the narration of the world. Illaoi has two facts about her lore that are displayed. One is about her religion and the other is about her being "Gangplank's first love," so even players who do not care about the lore are informed of

Illaoi's identity: a romantic object for a male champion (ReinaSweet). Which means, stereotypically, her identity is defined by and in relation to a male.

League champions are primarily male (62%) or female (36%), as identified through Riot Games' usage of pronouns in each champion's biography (Champions). This leaves a two-percent "other," or four champions with unidentified genders. One of these champions are alien, one is a shade and neither are given a gender. Instead, their biographies establish "it" as their pronouns. Kindred and Blitzcrank, however, are addressed with they/them pronouns. Blitzcrank is an automation that was turned into a golem. Viktor, the creator of Blitzcrank, refers to them using they/them pronouns. He recognizes an increased sentience in Blitzcrank and saw "Blitzcrank as a living being rather than simply a tool to do his bidding" (Champions: Blitzcrank). Viktor affirms Blitzcrank's existence through the use of they/them pronouns. Kindred is unique in *League* in that they "represent the twin essences of death," or rather they are two defined characters in one entity that work together. If a player "stand[s] and greet[s] Lamb's silvered bow […] her arrows will lay you down swiftly. If you refuse her, Wolf will join you for his merry hunt" (Champions: Kindred). Since Kindred is the single champion that uses non-binary pronouns, they are the de facto representation of non-binary genders. Kindred's identity revolves around their interactions, and while their representation isn't plastic, it is problematic. The imposition of gender-neutral pronouns onto Kindred allows for the reinforcement of the counter-stereotype of trans people as being "violent" or "criminal" to unknowledgeable and impressionable players (Gazzola and Morrison 86). Riot Games depicts Kindred as a predator with two inner voices, and while this might be a statement on gender dysphoria, where an individual's "emotional and psychological identity as male or female [is] opposite to one's biological sex," Kindred's

inner voices work *together* and not opposingly (Gender Dysphoria). Reportedly, the developers at Riot Games had every intention of creating a transgender champion, the now-released Taliyah, but they feared the backlash from the majority of the community and dismissed the idea of making Taliyah a trans champion (danielzklein). Instead, Taliyah was identified as a female champion after her release. Riot Games' refusal to publicly acknowledge an individual champion's identity on an officially sponsored platform suggests that individuals who identify as non-normative should hide themselves for fear of reprisal. Instead of taking a stance, Riot Games allowed the fear of backlash from their players to dictate narration thereby suppressing non-normative identities.

Similarly, as *League*'s gender representation supports hegemonic norms, the majority of champions are overwhelming heteronormative. There are two champions, Varus and Neeko, who identify as homosexual, but neither of their biographies explicitly state this. Both champions received backlash because the player base felt it was an unnecessary detail to include. Since Riot Games has deleted their official *League* forum boards, the only record of this backlash is Reddit.[11] While Reddit does not constitute the majority of *League* players, it is the most commonly traversed site for *League*-related discussions, so it is the best place to begin any historical archive. While some other players made the incorrect argument that it was wrong, a few individuals questioned the necessity of adding the champions' sexuality as a seeming afterthought because it is not defined for the other heterosexual champions. Players felt it was of no value regarding world building because it felt shallow in implementation (RealTalkVarus; DyQuill; Defendedx). Generally, multiple Reddit post

[11] Reddit is a forum-like website that allows users to anonymously (via username) post videos, images, and text on any given topic. League has their own page, or subreddit, found at www.reddit.com/r/leagueoflegends/. Users are able to "upvote" and "downvote" on an individual basis. One of the more common uses of this voting system is to signify agreeing with a statement or liking something.

reached in excess of over 1,000 "upvotes," so at least a 1,000 more redditors "upvoted" than those who "downvoted" the post.

Despite a well-crafted music video revealing Varus' new background and sexuality to the majority of players, the developers decided in 2014, five years after releasing the game, that the gender did not matter when creating a love story (Mikel; Varus Music Video).[12] While the music video is relatively clear on the relationship status between the two leading men, the video also introduces a third entity to their relationship. A darkin, which is essentially a demon, binds the souls of all three of them together to form Varus, which allowed the demon to escape from his prison. Riot Games turned their only male homosexual relationship into a two-guys, one-demon ménage who literally live through sin. It is important to note that developers have also clarified that Varus is not actually homosexual, but instead the two males who make up two-thirds of Varus are homosexual (@Spideraxe). In the same interview where the developers stated gender did not matter, the developers also claim that "diversity isn't an explicit goal for our roster [of champions]" and that they didn't want to force diversity.

Conversely, another article a year later states that, "Riot has said that diversity is an 'explicit goal,'" however, diversity for diversity's sake is a clear example of plastic representation (Carpenter). The champion's reworked background reflects Riot Games' attempt in marketing towards a specific demographic. During an interview about the remaking of Varus, the developers revealed that their intentions were to create a scenario

[12] Riot Games constantly updates the biographies of champ. Sometimes the changes are small and hard to notice. Varus' change, however, resulted in a complete overhaul of his lore. The new video introduced his backstory as if he were a new champion. The video cemented the "love" Varus' biography mentions as homosexual over the homosocial through the use of body language. Their relationship is also reinforced in a comic strip that immediately predates the video.

where players were willing to flip through multiple forms of media for the entire story ("League of Legends: The remaking of Varus a behind the scenes look"). Riot Games created a comic series highlighting the homosexual relationship only so they could rely on that relationship during the music video to help create a tragic story. Varus is not a champion that happens to be homosexual but the characters who formed Varus' identifies revolve around their sexuality; this is only exacerbated when it was revealed there was a pool of champions the developers were considering for this reinvention and the original Varus was not the only prospect. Similarly, to the example of Jay Z's *Moonlight* in "In The Time of Plastic Representation," "the original work maintains its universality in this instance by proving that 'anyone'" can fulfill the requirements which gives off the "feel[ing] like hollow experiments produced in a laboratory; they feel plastic" (Warner). Varus' story does not tell *his* story as a homosexual male, but rather, it tells a story about a homosexual male.

Neeko, the only female homosexual, is portrayed quite differently than Varus. Her story begins with the destruction of her home, fleeing for safety, and the finding of someone who seems similar to her. Neeko's story feels comparatively authentic for multiple reasons. Firstly, it is original, whereas Varus already had a lore that was forcibly reinvented. More importantly, her preferences aren't explicitly highlighted for storyline purposes, and when her preferences surface, it makes sense. Neeko finds Nidalee, another female champion who can transform into a creature, and forms a deep connection with her over time. Despite the more authentic biography, the developers still had to clarify Neeko's sexuality using a non-Riot Games sponsored source (Carpenter). The biography does not explicitly state information on her sexuality, so the question was posed because the lore "seems to" suggest homosexuality. The response was a resounding yes, "[Neeko] identifies as lesbian"

(@Spideraxe). This lack of official acknowledgement of sexuality when compared to Illaoi and Gangplank suggests that homosexuality should be hidden. In the single case of it not being hidden (Varus), it is viewed as sin.

Just as with movies, other video games, and other forms of media, Riot Games' bottom line is profits. While the vocal minority can cause issues, if the vocal majority of a player base disagrees with something then it is not likely a developer would introduce controversial changes. That does not allow them freedom from fallout for egregious acts or methods. While champions being plastic is not necessarily a crime, it is disingenuous representation. A champion who represents an actual demographic should not support hegemonic discourse unless it is done so in a meaningful way. The champions' identity should be unique based on a matching thematic choice or design and not because of a forced narrative designed for niche marketing. These champion's identity should also not be constricted sexual representation, but there should also be a consideration towards ethnicity, race, social class, and other markers of difference. While this thesis focuses primarily on gendered representations, *League* offers other areas worth interrogating.

Diversity and Inclusion at Riot Games

In 2018, Kotaku published "Inside The Culture of Sexism At Riot Games" by Cecilia D'Anastasio that revealed rampant sexism in the work atmosphere at Riot Games that mirrors the stereotypes *League* portrays. This is a clear example of the "executive authorities not producing anything that differs from their personal beliefs," because they have a steady fanbase that provides profits for their business (McCormick 172). Essentially, their business product reflects their reported work atmosphere. D'Anastasio highlights over 28 Riot employees describing circumstances that include blatant sexism. The very same blatant

sexism that is evident throughout the game. It was only after these accusations surfaced Riot Games published a diversity and inclusion (DI) statement, but Riot Games argues the statement was created, but not published, before Kotaku released their article. Reviewing Riot Games' DI statement still highlights the culture D'Anastasio reveals through their article. The statement includes four problematic "beliefs" via bullet points followed by an equally problematic statement ("Diversity, Inclusion, and Culture"). The first bullet mimics the forced game design of Varus' sexuality. Riot Games claims "That when teams are both diverse and inclusive they win. Every time." This simple bullet point suggests that diversity and inclusion guarantee a win. However, Riot Games does not define what being diverse and inclusive consist of, and instead, the ambiguity of the assertion makes the point feel hollow. Thus, any DI that Riot Games does accomplish is strictly for optics in the same way Varus' representation of diversity is simply for diversity's sake.

The second bullet discusses strengths and weaknesses, but the imperative of this bullet is Riot Games' clarification: the DI statement is considered "whether [it is in] the office or in a game." The DI statement, and thus the actions of Riot Games as a company, extend to the game itself. However, despite Riot Games' proclamation of a change in attitude, the developers clearly do not care about their DI statement. Rampant racism, misogyny, and other forms of discrimination are clear through even team names. An article as recent as September 11, 2020 found names like "Black Lives Don't Matter" and "We Hate Muslims n Jews" within the game and names similar to these are not uncommon, yet they often go unpunished (Geddes). These names only disprove the third bullet on the DI statement: "we must call out sexism, racism, homophobia, transphobia, ableism, ageism, religious discrimination, and bigotry of all kinds."

The final bullet makes a proclamation on how "work can be a place where you make lifelong friends," but that does not really have anything to do with diversity and inclusion. Finally, Riot Games' DI page claims they "launched th[e] page so that everyone can see that we are backing up our words with actions." However, the DI statement is simply another port for Riot Games' to provide more "words" without providing meaningful "actions." Riot Games has fired employees based on accounts of sexual harassment (Jacob Wolf) and racism (Kim), but these examples do not combat systemic issues.

The sexism at Riot Games extends beyond passing over female employee's promotions, although that certainly is/was an issue, and the sexism also includes sexual harassment against females that objectify them as less than human. E-mails were circulated among Riot Games employees with sexually suggestive language concerning female employees, and in other instances clearly outlining the rampant sexism behind decision-making from senior leaders within the company. One female employee discusses the rigorous interview process, a process that males likely would not have faced, that "proved" she was a "real, Riot-style gamer" (D'Anastasio). In the given example, the female employee underwent an hour-long interview process where she had to "prove" her gamer status. The interviewee recalls being fact-checked and interrogated. The interviewee was eventually hired but considered giving the interview her *World of Warcraft* log-in information so the interviewer could clearly see the time she spent gaming.[13] D'Anastasio quotes multiple sources claiming "women have fallen through Riot's hiring processes because they weren't

[13] There exist an argument regarding "hardcore" and "casual" gaming within the field of video game studies and amongst video game players. It is a conversation that is worth having, but it is not within the scope of this paper. One of the larger issues with the conversation, as evident in this interview, is the "hardcore" perspective often involves some form of elitist ideology.

considered 'core gamers.'" This is a result of the "bro culture," as identified by D'Anastasio, that permeates throughout Riot Games Headquarters.[14]

Just as the video game promotes negative stereotypes towards gender and sexuality, so too does the sexism within Riot Games. Males are not exempt from sexual harassment and even assault. One male employee who remained anonymous, similar to most interviewees, details accounts where "one of Riot's male senior leaders regularly grabbed [the employee's] genitals" and how he if he entered a meeting with no women the senior leader would "just fart on someone's face" (D'Anastasio). D'Anastasio reports that in 2016, 80% of the workforce at Riot Games were male. However, the majority of employees interviewed by Kotaku were female.

Riot's response to Kotaku's article does provide a counter to the reports of sexism. Oksana Kubushyna, the highest ranked woman in Riot Games' organization chart in 2018, claims, "If two Rioters are doing the same job, they're evaluated on a similar criteria" (Wolf). Joe Hixon, communications lead for Riot Games in 2018, provided a statement on popular social media website Reddit supporting Kubushyna's assertion. Hixon claims that "promoting/hiring anyone less deserving than anyone else" is not something that occurs at Riot Games, but Hixon does not define who or what qualifies as "deserving." Based on D'Anastasio's report, only "core gamers" are deserving of employment. The community did not react well to Hixon's statement. The highest upvoted statement, counting over 1,000 "upvotes," summarizes Hixon's statement as "a whole lot of nothing" (RiotSmileyjoe). The

[14] "Bro culture" is a term that D'Anastasio claims multiple sources used to describe the work atmosphere within Riot Games. We are never given an accurate meaning, but it seems relatively explanatory. However, for clarity, "bro culture" seems to revolve around a hyper-masculine male setting at the expense of other genders. Common occurrences in such a setting include unfairness based on gender, sexual harassment, and punishments for those who do not emulate the culture's behavior.

common trend between *League*'s implementation of genders/sexualities and Riot Games' handling of sexism is the same in meaning: hollow, empty, and plastic. The outcome of the original article and continued sexism is still ongoing. Originally, Riot Games agreed to settle the pending lawsuit against them by aggravated parties for $10 million, but the intervention of governmental agencies detected possible collusion (lovesic; Taylor). The governmental agencies valued the possible damages and interests closer to $400 million.

Gameplay and Identification

The previous chapter analyzed *League*'s inclusion of champions with various genders and sexualities with a focus on consumer response and demand. As Adrienne Shaw argues, niche marketing places the onus of representation on the consumer or audience. More specifically, marginalized groups determine what constitutes "good" representation in games. The call for "better" representation often leads to surface-level representations through generic storylines or backgrounds (Shaw). This qualitative language is subjective and suggests there is a singular standard in representing a given demographic. For instance, Varus' tragic background, as analyzed in the previous chapter, mirrors homosexual representations often found in literary text, but the inclusion of few queer champions suggests that there are limited, definable queer identities. People who do not identify with or as the limited queer identities but identify as queer may not have a "good" form of representation. Therein lies two core issues with only analyzing the narrative.

Firstly, the generalization of a marginalized community that may occur from creating champions for niche marketing causes "symbolic annihilation" for community members who do not identify with the champion (Tuchman). In the case of *League*, sexuality exists in binary opposition: champions are either heterosexual or homosexual. However, in terms of representation, unless a queer player's sexuality identifies with/as Neeko or Varus, their existence is not acknowledged as a way of being. If developers "can do anything" in a fantasy setting, why needlessly ignore a possible player base ("League of Legends: The remaking of Varus a behind the scenes look")? Understanding this relationship highlights the importance of intersectionality. *League* ignores nearly all possible moments of

intersectionality. Champions who identify as homosexual also have no possible romantic prospects.

Secondly, marginalized audiences are ambivalent towards games without representation for them (Shaw Loc 91). A *League* player who is unable to find representation within the game will either ignore all representations or quit playing the game. Decentralizing the responsibility of representation increases audience reachability (Shaw). Instead of discussing the gender disparity within League, players would be more apt to discuss the game itself. Shaw argues that marginalized groups often do not care about physical representations but are more concerned with representation of their experience. As one interviewee noted, being gay is an extremely small portion of their life (Shaw Loc 2931). Shaw continues, stating that her interviewees did not feel "their versions of those identifiers were represented" because traditional niche marketing signifies there are categorical definitions and requirements for different representations. However, identities are flexible, which makes any definitive marker of difference impossible.

Why should representation matter then if "good" and "bad" representations are subjective and unfruitful? Richard Dyer argues it is better to ask what the representations do for the text. While Dyer's analysis is primarily on film, the matter of representation is central to video games as well. Dyer's *White* interrogates, among many things, "what is available to use, all of us, to make sense of white people" (xiii). The previous chapter and parts of this chapter extends Dyer's arguments of representation with their arguments presented in "Stereotyping" towards video games. Seth Giddings extends Dyer's notions to include how the text influences the audience. He stresses the importance of the "event," the moment the player and text interact. This will be the main focus of chapter 4. Where chapter 3 focused on

analyzing the aesthetics of champions, this chapter will discuss what aesthetics means for *League*'s gameplay and how those aesthetics inform a player's process of identification and representation. It is important to identify the difference between identification and representation. Where representation acts as the portrayal or description of a collective, identification is the act of establishing identity. The majority of current scholarship interrogates self-representation in avatars and identification in single-player games. However, there still exist a matter of being identified through interactions with other players. *League*'s primary gameplay requires this interaction and demands being identified by other players.

Throughout this chapter I draw on multiple concepts regarding identity and identification. For this reason, a reference in delimiting the different meanings or usages of "identity" and "identification" might prove useful.

> Sameness Identity: "being identical to," or an "identification with one's character … as the player enter[s] a state where [they] ha[ve] an experience of 'being' the character." (Tronstad 251)
>
> Empathic Identity: having "empathy" with a character," or "identification may be understood as experiencing what the character experiences, but without the feeling of being identical to it – that is, with a consciousness of the character as an entity other than ourselves, but with which we can identify." (Tronstad 251)
>
> Identification *as*: "a process by which we come to feel an affective connection with a character on the basis of seeing that character as separate and yet a part of us in some way." (Shaw Loc 1797-1806)

> Identification *with*: is when "people see that what they are identifying with as separate from themselves" (Shaw Loc 1551)

There are clear connections between Tronstad's "sameness identity" and "empathic identity" with Shaw's "identification *as*" and "identification *with*," respectively. Specifically, "sameness identity" and "identification *as*" relies upon the player's sense of identification seeing themselves within the object in relation. Whereas "empathic identity" and "identification *with*" are moments of identification where the player's sense of identification is separated, by them, from the object in relation to them. Shaw later posits that Stuart "Hall argues that a focus on identification is potentially more useful than a focus on identity, as it allows for the contextual self-definition of the individual, rather than defining them from the outside" (Loc 1253). While I agree with Hall, and by extension Shaw, that focusing on self-identification is important, as Dyer argues in *White*, understanding "the making involved, the production of ideas of peoples, and the full affective, sensuous weight of the word *sense* as well as its more cerebral one" is at least equally important as understanding self-identification (xiii, original emphasis). That is to say, it is equally important to interrogate forms of self-identification for the purposes of self-representation as it is to interrogate how users are identified by other players, particularly when one player assumes a position of privilege. Towards the end of this chapter and the majority of the next, I use identification as a method of being identified by other players or viewers. It is for this purpose I argue the following term should be added to the lexicon of identification and identity

> Relational Identity: is when a person (or player, in video games) may identify *with* or *as* an entity/object while simultaneously identified differently by another player based on an alternative representational aspect(s) of the same entity/object.

Other forms of identification analyze and describe the tension between player-character. However, the majority of networked games include a player-character-player relationship that includes representation through the video game medium. So, while a player identifies *with* or *as* their character/avatar, players are likely identifying the other player. In this way, identification occurs between player-character and player-player through character or group mediation, and often, the player is identified as the separate entity/object by other players because of a lack in alternatives. This form of identification becomes present in the next chapter of this project by discussing identification between players as they identify with a streamer and/or the streamer's group. In moments of relational identity, imitation forms the sense of identification among viewers and players.

Playing an extension of self allows for freedom in positionality of the character in terms of identification. When a player identifies as a character, they relate to that character. However, when a player identifies with a character, the player recognizes shared experiences with the character but they do not wholly relate. One of the more popular champions is Lee Sin. One of his dance-abilities is the famous Jean-Claude Van Damme dance from *Kickboxer* (1989) (GrimlyGaming). Unfortunately, Lee Sin does not do JCVD's even more iconic splits, but the inclusion of this dance clearly connects JCVD with Lee Sin. Furthermore, Lee Sin is a martial arts-based champion, so players who are familiar with JCVD's movies are able to identify with Lee Sin through the inclusion of this dance move. However, knowledge of the source material does not guarantee identification with the champion but it makes identification possible. Ragnhild Tronstad identifies a similar concept through "sameness identity" and "empathic identity" (251). Sameness identity occurs when the player feels identical to the character while empathic identity denotes a relation to the character but not

an exactness. *League* requires the use of both, but it is important not to confuse identification with representation. While the feeling of representation is only possible through identification, they are not interchangeable. Flexibility is, however, inherent in both representation and identity. A champion can represent aspects of a player and a player's identity can shift between champions.

During a standard *League* game, a player's consciousness embodies their champion's. Rarely do the champion's wants or needs (based on lore) interact or impact the champion's actions. During gameplay, the player might identify *as* the character through actions and in thought. In-game communication often revolves around the player performing the actions instead of the champion. One of the in-game mechanics are called "pings." Players use this to communicate their intended movements. One of the more popular pings displays [Player Name] (Champion name) "is on the way!" in the chat box while showing an arrow at the place pinged (see image below for example). There is a distinct lack of categorical information regarding gender of the player and champion performing the action, but there are indicators of who is the actor. The first identifier is the username of the player. Until September 5th 2020, the username hovered over each champion in the game (Akib). Instead of identifying the champion, players identified the player. Similarly, a player's name above the champion enforced a sense of identification with the champion as form of representation for themselves. While this is still the default setting, players now have the option of changing the name above their champion to the champion name. The second identifier chat box is the

champion name. Including both names allows for confusion between sameness and emphatic identification. It also blurs identities between the player, the champion, and player-champion relationship (Giddings).

Fig. 1: Screenshot of League with highlighted methods of identification

The blurred lines only help normalize transgender play. Approximately 36% of *League* champions are female, but this number varies if positional representation is interrogated. Within *League*, one of the five positions on the team is called "bottom" or "bot" for short.[15] There are socially accepted champions that fill this position. Approximately 50% of these champions are female as identified through the use of pronouns in their biographies.

[15] The names of the positions relate to the positionality on the map. A "top" is short for the "top laner," a "mid" goes to the middle lane, and the "jungle" roams the map taking resources from the between spaces known as the jungle. The "support" is identified as such because their primary job, historically, is to support the carry player. Their position on the map changes throughout the game, but they are known to stay in the bottom lane supporting the "bot" player. Historically, the "bot" player used to be known as the "ADC," or attack-damage carry. The ADC role was expanded to include champions magic-based over strict physical damage champions so a name change was required.

So, players choose between limiting their champion selections based on gender or engage in transgender game play. It is normalized to play as an alternate demographic(s) than the player's identity traditionally aligns with. Shaw argues that this engagement actually creates disidentification between player and champion. While disidentification removes the possibility of identifying *as* a champion, disidentification allows players to create emotive relationships with champions and identify *with* them. For example, a male character may never identify as Lee Sin because of his JCVD performance but the process of disidentification may allow for that player to identify with Lee Sin because of a martial arts background. Disidentification also allows for the distance required to acknowledge identification in other champions. The 3rd-person top-down camera angle only helps separate the player from their champion and meet the requirements for identification (King and Krzywinksa 100).

Certain mechanics of champions rely upon intertwined aesthetics, gameplay, and embodiment. One of the niche mechanics is a charm function that only exist in three out of 151 champions. Two of the three are hyper-sexualized females and the third is a hyper-sexualized male whose identity is defined by his relationship with his female counterpart. Ahri, a kitsune-based champion, relies on traits often associated with the kitsune mythology. Ahri's ability names are "Orb of Deception," "Fox-Fire," and "Charm." Her implicit role in the game is a magic-based assassin, but her champion only functions if her Charm ability succeeds. Riot Games coded Ahri so that enemy champions take extra damage after Charm connects with an enemy champion model. Ahri throws a pink heart at enemy champions (aesthetics) because optimal play demands it through coded interactions (gameplay). The blurring of self and champion reinforces a player's ability to project self so their goals align

with Ahri's interactions. Here, "optimal play" refers to the relationship between player-mechanic interactions. *League* is a game of weighed options, so referring to something as "optimal" holds connotations that do not fit the scope of this paper. As with most definitions in game studies, it is nearly impossible to define terminology beyond specific instances. "Optimal" gameplay is no exception given the different context and requirements the word "optimal" demands of different genre and video games. Speaking generally, "optimal" gameplay may be defined as "a series of choices that ensure the greatest chance of achieving the desired outcome." For *League*, there simply is not a single way of achieving the game's goal, so the term "optimal" is malleable because there are different, equally valid methods of attaining the goal. For this paper, I define optimal play as: "a player using predetermined, coded mechanics for an in-game advantage." Developers intended gameplay is another way to define optimal player. By increasing damage after Ahri's Charm connects with another champion, developers emphasize a certain order of skills; there is a specific order that abilities should be used when dealing maximum damage.

Evelyn is another champion that uses a charm function. Similar to Ahri, Evelyn is a magic-based assassin whose charm effect increases her gameplay abilities. Arguments regarding the politics of representation would focus on the hyper-sexualization of each champion. Despite their magic-based abilities, developers suggest that only attractive females may charm through the aesthetic representations of who may, and more importantly who may not, charm. Aesthetically, Evelyn's charm function is similar to Ahri's. A pink heart forms over the target of Evelyn's charm. Functionally, player interactions with this mechanic is limited between Ahri, Evelyn, or Rakan. Rakan is a male support champion, but he is also hypersexualized. His identity revolves around his in-game partner, Xayah. While Rakan's

nickname is "The Charmer," his lore and special interactions with Xayah suggest the champion only cares about "charming" Xayah; they are often identified as the lover's duo. Despite this "desire" from Rakan for Xayah, mechanics and gameplay require the player to charm other players. This is a complete break from sameness identity and another example of when mechanics and player desires do not align with champion goals.

There are three instances of possible player interactions, mechanics, and champion goals aligning that promote identification as a champion. These three instances are all moments where the character and player's goals align even if briefly. The character's goals are derived from interactions between champions discussed in the biographies, but they only occur when very specific requirements are met, a "quest" may appear. The first quest only occurs when two specific champions, Rengar and Kha'zix, are on opposing teams. The winner of the quest is awarded an increase in stats until the end of the game. By lore, the champions are rivals and this quest aligns the desire of the champion and the mission of the player through explicit measures. Whichever champion kills the other is the winner of the quest.

A similar quest where the player's and champion's goals meet exists between three champions: Ashe, Sejuani, and Lissandra. If two of these three champions find themselves on opposing teams, a quest will appear after certain coded conditions are met. The winner is provided a temporary crown indicating they are the "Queen of the Freijlord."[16] Despite this enhancement, players temporarily have access to a text detailing their victory, but there is no actual increase in champion abilities as seen in Rengar vs. Kha'zix. This similarity in

[16] Freijlord is the fictional region the champions are from.

functionality of the quests allows for players to assume there is a mechanical reward, so any alignment in desires between champion and player is falsified.

The final quest revolves around another couple. In *League*'s lore, Thresh killed Senna, Lucian's wife, and took her soul. Senna has since escaped captivity and rejoined Lucian in *League*. If Thresh is played against either Senna or Lucian, a quest appears after certain coded conditions are met similar to other quests. Also similar to other quests is how the quest is completed: kill the other champion. Unlike the "Queen of the Freijlord" quest, whichever champion succeeds gains a significant mechanical advantage. Despite the reward, each of these quests allows for a player's identity and desires to align. Quests allow for an identification as the champion through a shared goal.

However, this identification (disidentification included) with a champion predetermines social interactions within *League*'s gameplay. The champion becomes the digital projection of the player, and while the champion may not represent the player as self, "one's [champion] becomes a persistent, representation of self" for another player's interpretation (MacCallum-Stewart 13). Certain roles and champions provide a stereotypical image of the player. The support role consists of a subcategory of champions known as "enchanters." These champions (Nami, Janna, Lulu, Karma, Taric, etc.) are predominately female which supports the stereotypical representations of the female gamer (Ratan et al.). Two major general stereotypes exist among the gaming community that extend beyond *League*'s scope and they support each other. The first stereotype is that females only play supports and more specifically they only play healing supports. The second stereotype is that females only play video games because their male partner needs a healer. In moments of empathic identity, players may feel these stereotypes pressed upon them. These forms of

stereotypes persist throughout the game and are not contingent upon being a "support," but they are the player's first impression of their teammates.

When including networked players, the skill of the player also directly impacts their sense of identity (Shaw; Ratan et al.). In these moments, identification is often ignored in favor of gameplay itself. When playing *League*, players – professional or otherwise – are more likely to worry about mechanics, macro, and other elements of the gameplay over forms of representation and champion-specific identification. Instead, their identities were questioned in the same way stereotypical discourse threatened their identity. In relation to the text, *League* includes a ranked-queue designed to pose players against equally skilled opponents. The ranks range from Iron IV to Challenger where the highest ranked are challenging the "legends" themselves. Most professional players are Challenger and are better than 0.01% of players per server.[17,18] There are four divisions within each tier until Master tier (the third highest) after which there is simply a number that is used to track progression. After playing ranked games, a player earns or losses "LP" based on if they win or lose. The more wins a player gets, the faster they achieve a higher rank; the inverse is also true. A player's sense of identity is qualified through an associated skill level and displayed for other players to see. Despite the lack of representation during this instance of self-projection, sameness identity is invoked because players view their champion's actions as

[17] Most countries have one or two servers that are networked throughout the country. North America has a server in Chicago, IL that Canada and North America use. Korea has a singular server that Korea and Chinese play on. However, in some instances, countries have two servers. Europe has EUW (Europe West) and EUNE (Europe Nordic and East). China has two servers because they have a regular server and a "super" server designed for professional and high-level play, but a lot of professionals play on the Korean server because of an overall increased game quality. Ranks are relative to server. This also creates an argument regarding regional strength. It is hard to concretely say the relative percentage of Challenger players compared to other players because each server size is vastly different. For North America, being Challenger means you are among the top 0.014% of the server, but in Korea it means you are among the top 0.0067% of players.

[18] Professional players will be discussed more thoroughly in the next chapter. However, the theories around representation and identification are applicable to both professional and non-professional players, currently.

their own. If the champion fails it is because the player failed and the player fails when the champion does.

While an assigned rank may play a role in identification, network aesthetics may also influence player-champion and player-player interactions and identification. Riot Games has recently announced the removal of their "club" feature (Esguerra). Currently, clubs are networked through the use of an in-client function that creates a chat function for members to talk through when not in game. One of the more popular uses of this feature is to provide an asynchronous meeting place for "one-trick ponies," or players who prefer to play the same champion every game. Within these networks, players share tips regarding their preferred champion.

Clubs also provide a central hub for communication among friends or organizations. During my tenure at Appalachian State University, I joined the university gaming club. Each club creates an acronym that is attached to the username, and the gaming club's identifier, or tag, was "AppSt" (see Fig. 1). This identifier acts as a pre-text to the player's username during the load-in screen and is placed behind the player's name above their champion during the game. Even long after I left the university's team because of scheduling conflicts, I continued using their club tag. While I would not identify as a club member, my *League* username disagreed. This connection allowed for a better chance of playing with other people I knew. In those games, *we* identified as a singular. We were "AppSt" players.

Riot Games has implemented a similar function for searching for teammates. *League*'s most popular event is a semi-irregular tournament called "Clash." Teams are formed through invite only and they play in a tournament style bracket. Rewards for the tournament increase in value with each win, and every player who participates attains a

digital banner for their profile to show participation. Functionally, the gameplay mirrors the professional play discussed in Chapter 5. There are some minor changes in setting up the game compared to normal games including the recruit function. Players may only join Clash in teams of five, so solo players are normally out of luck. Reddit, Discord, and other subcommunities have, in the past, provided a space for players to find teams, but playing with strangers is not always desirable. Recently, Riot Games implemented a function connecting friends of friends specifically for Clash. By flipping a switch, players appear on friends of their friend's list as potential Clash teammates. While Riot Games is removing their club feature because they are "never going to create a community tool that beats out the industry leaders," such as Discord, yet the recruit function for Clash provides exactly that (Karadwe).

The shift from a client feature to an outside program, Discord, also increases the demand that players monitor Riot's politics of representation. While the removal of clubs reduces problematic language as discussed in the previous chapter, removing visuals of the problem do not address or answer the issue in any meaningful way. Instead, players are now forced to navigate through another network. Within Discord, players are able to change their username instantaneously and as often as desired. This method on being identified differs from usages of identification greatly. Instead of relying on social constructs as a method of identification, although those are certainly still present, this method of identification is similar to a government-issued card that identifies the user in the sense that the card identifies the identity of the player. This is an instance of "relational identity" as defined earlier. While on one end of the spectrum is complete anonymity through the use of a new/unfamiliar username, the other end is a reveal of identity through the use of a player's

real-life name, but this is more of a testament to Discord's features than *League*'s. *League* usernames are changeable using in-game currency (known as "RP" or "BE"), but the currency is not free. Players have the option of buying $10 USD worth of "RP" or use in-game currency (BE) that is earned slowly over time through playing. Regardless, changing your form of digital identification costs money or time. Regardless of the program, the user-created username represents, in part, the identity of the player while also providing momentary tension for other players to interpret.

Riot Games' prioritizes "platform constraints" and "economic context" as found evident through their reworked network integration (Jagoda 414). In their blog that discusses the decision to move towards Discord over a Riot-created application, Riot Games highlights the outdated functionality of clubs and the labor/money that would be required to keep the club function properly working. The author argues that they would rather focus on "what [they] are uniquely suited to do" (Karadwe). Karadwe highlights "combating game-ruining behavior, finally improving our client, reworking our item system or building new ways to play like TFT."[19,20] Despite the assertions from last chapter about Riot Games' interest in diversity and inclusion, this situation accurately reflects Jagoda's assertion that gaming's focus on "profit generation has overtaken genuine innovation and a concern with social activism" (414). The destruction of networks within *League*'s infrastructure actively negates current, and prevents future, forms of identification.

[19] Combating game-ruining behavior, the lack of functionality in the client, and the item system have all been complaints for years.

[20] TFT stands for Teamfight Tactics. This is a *League*-inspired game that exist in the genre of auto battler. This is a relatively new genre that also stems from *DoTA*. Without going into too much specifics, the game is similar to a traditional deck-building game and is reached through *League*'s game client. This was the second, separate game Riot Games game out with. *Legends of Runeterra* has since come out as a separate card game much like *Hearthstone* and is also set in *League*'s lore.

Discord also provides a voice-chat function. While *League* has instilled an in-game voice-chat function in recent years, voice-chat capabilities only extend to teammates. In order to talk to an enemy team, players must use the text-chat box. Another feature Riot Games employs is a "report" feature. This is a rather standard feature in online games. In *League*, players may report other players for negative behavior, including negative attitude, verbal abuse, leaving the game / away from keyboard, intentional feeding, hate speech, cheating, and an offensive or inappropriate name.[21] However, the transition from one network to another, and more importantly from a Riot-controlled network to a Riot-sponsored network means feedback regarding voice communications may prove ineffective. Riot Games explicitly states they "don't have any behavior systems" for punishing abusive voice, so instead of "combating game-ruining behavior" developers shifted the issue to another platform (Isto). Without access to the voice communication, Riot Games cannot act on any problematic interactions. If "analyzing networks … can open up the structural aspects of injustice," as Patrick Jagoda argues, then the removal of still-needed networks reflects, at least, an obliviousness of injustices and at most an ignoring of social injustices (428).

It is important to note that *League* does not require voice-chat. In fact, the restrictions on voice-chat extend past excluding opponents. Only premade parties in *League* are able to enter a voice-chat together. This prevents random players from screaming in your ears, yelling disparaging things, and collaborative game play. Voice-chat is always a choice. The use of this function through *League*'s client or Discord only increases the sociality of playing. As Shaw argues, the context of play often supersedes moments of identification. The

[21] "Away from keyboard" is also known as "AFK." Generally, it means literally stepping away from the game. However, the word's usage varies between users. AFK is now used more broadly to include activities other players categorize as not actively trying to win.

use of voice, as we have discussed, is a major decision in context of play that demands self-identification and relational identity through the use of technology. When someone with a deep voice, a regional accent, or a foreign language speaks players may create assumptions around the player's identity that do not align with the player's self-identification. So far, this text has presumed *League* is an inherently social game, and while I argue this is true, there is also flexibility in the sociality of playing.

League offers a few options regarding controlling player-player interactions. As discussed before, recently Riot Games has added the ability to change, in-game, hovering player's usernames to the champion names and voice-chat is optional. A player can always queue for a game on their own, so their expected levels of communication drastically decreases than a player who plays with a friend. In an effort to combat toxicity, the developers added an option to turn off all text-chat, allied and enemy alike, and finally, players are able to mute emotes and pings. Turning off all methods of communications between players and playing the game in an otherwise empty room is the most extreme example of an isolated *League* player. However, given the nature of *League*, a player must use a peripheral device, normally a mouse and keyboard, that interacts with the game. The game responds accordingly when the actions are player vs. environment, but *League*'s primary game mode, and the primary point of analysis for this project, includes nine other players. While an isolated player might have zero methods of traditional communication with their teammates, their champion body language informs their teammates an equal amount as real-life body language informs those around us. One of the best examples of this exists between the bottom position and the support position. Champions that are designed for the bottom position are often weak early but get stronger as the game progresses. The support

champions often provide healing, shielding, or damage to help mitigate the early game weaknesses of champions they support. In order for the bottom lane player and support player to survive the early game, they must work together. There is a chance one or both of them die in-game if they play too aggressively, too passively, or differently. In moments of sociality, players are able to learn and identify gameplay patterns of their teammate. The bottom lane player will identify when their support moves into position to use an ability. The bottom lane player may move forward ensuring an even fight, or they may move backwards indicating a desire to play safe. Regardless of how the interaction occurs, even in the most reasonably isolated gameplay, social interaction dictates the experience and impacts formations of identity.

Potential Diversity ≠ Increased Identification

It is understandable to assume that the potential for diversity should mean an increased number of players who identify with any given aspect of a video game. *League*'s only limiting factor in diversity is the developer's imagination and technical restraints. However, developers would have to account for every player's experience. Then, developers would have to situate those experiences among meaningful gameplay without creating surface-level caricatures. This does not sound like a small task, but returning to Shaw's previous assertion might help in answering how to increase identity in video games: "The goal in increasing representation in games is not expanding customization options but rather making more games that reflect more modes of being in the world" (Loc 2765).

The customization options in *League* are minimal. Skins provide players a way of customizing their champion through limited premade options, and since *League* still revolves around the free-to-play model Beck and Merrill started the company with, cosmetics are a

large source of revenue for the game. I am not suggesting the cessation of skins. That may be the end of *League*, but Shaw's argument revolving around making more games that reflect more modes of being in the world rings true for *League* and Riot Games as a whole. *League* players already transgress barriers bound by markers of difference in everyday gameplay, so why is acknowledging different lifestyles, experiences, and existences an issue?

Identification in eSports and Streaming

It has been fifteen years since YouTube revolutionized online video content. The electronic world has changed drastically since then, yet problematic gendered representations remain the same. Not only does the video game industry favor the masculine over the feminine, but these preferences also extend towards eSports and the streaming of video games (Ruvalcaba et al.). While previous studies interrogate how communities around streams form and define group identification, few studies signify the importance of this formation in a larger cultural context (Hamilton et al.; Cheung and Huang; Nakandala et al.; Karhulahti). I hope to extend our understanding of how these groups are formulated through a deeper analysis of Twitch by identifying how the formation of groups interact with the text, how identification between viewers and streamer interacts, and I gesture towards the cultural importance of streaming communities. Specifically, I argue that viewers' identification exists in conjunction with *and* opposed to other viewers' identity. I also assert that within the context of eSports a viewer's sense of identification changes because eSports exists separately from the cultural object by the addition of rules inherent in professional gameplay. Finally, I conclude that systemic issues may continue because streaming and eSports lacks proper moderation or accountability. However, before attending to these issues, a greater understanding of streaming and eSports' formation is important to understanding the current status of each phenomenon.

History

If we casually define eSports as 'competitive digital game play mediated by electronics' then the history of eSports begins with *Spacewar!* (1962). More specific definitions may unnecessarily and incorrectly exclude early tournaments, and anything

broader would begin incorporating pinball machines or trading card games (*Magic: The Gathering*) within our discussion. The first video game tournament, as discussed in Chapter 3 of this thesis, occurred in 1972 and was a *Spacewar!* tournament at Stanford University covered by *Rolling Stone* magazine (World Video 39; Schlosser; Collis; Taylor). However, as Collis identifies, this event was for a privileged few at the university. [22]

The next major tournament would not be until 1980. Atari sponsored the Atari National Championship for *Space Invaders* that drew in over 10,000 participants (Collis; Costrel). This tournament set the standard that is still used today in some eSport events. Specifically, this format uses the now-traditional tournament format with scaling rewards through the top three, five, or even ten winners. The winner of this tournament, Rebecca "Becky" Heineman, is quoted in Netflix's *High Score* as saying how video games "allowed [her] to be [her]self" because "when [she] played video games, [she] was in this virtual world." While this docu-series argues that this event occurred before spectators existed, this is simply not true. Becky Heineman's focus on the game simply negated the spectatorship aspect for her during her gameplay.

The next decade saw the economic bubble collapse regarding video games followed by the domestication of video game consoles and the personal computer, as well as the invention of the world wide web. While previous decades saw gameplay that consisted of asynchronous, localized gameplay centering around arcades, the early and mid-1990s provided the exact opposite. The new technology provided a network for users to interact, competitively or otherwise, with other users synchronously. One of the first games that

[22] It is worth noting that the information within this is chapter, unless otherwise specified, refers to events in North America and specifically the United States. As Zhang and Hjorth argue, the rise of eSports and streaming is dependent on cultural context. For this reason, our scope is limited to the United States.

afforded multiplayer play was *Doom* (1993). While drastically different technology wise, *Doom*'s online play resembles the functionality of modern multiplayer. While modern games use Wide Area Network (WAN), *Doom* allowed for a larger networked play compared to the standard single-player mode of other games at the time through DWANGO (Dial-up Wide-Area Network Games Operation) that required an hourly fee on top of dial-up costs (Taylor; Collis). In 1997, the Electronics and Entertainment Expo (E3) sponsored a tournament titled "Red Annihilation." Brad King and John Borland claim in *Dungeons and Dreamers: The Rise of Computer Game Culture from Geek to Chic* (2003) that current technology prevented cross-country gameplay, which led to an East vs. West coast mentality at Red Annihilation. The physical distance was too great between coastal players which made their ping and latency increase.[23,24] While this is still an issue in today's gaming world, it is mostly a minor issue nationally. For *League*, latency and ping only become an issue when playing at the highest levels of competition or when playing across countries. King and Borland continue by describing the trash-talk between players that led to an increased prize pool: the inclusion of a 1987 Ferrari (Taylor). "The event has gone down in e-sports history as one of the most famous, for the prominence of the venue, the sponsors, and the prize" (Taylor 16).

A year before E3, Blizzard Entertainment's *Starcraft* (1996) was released. *Starcraft* became instrumental in shaping contemporary eSports (Karhulahti). Just as it is impossible to tell the history of video games without Japan's Nintendo, it is equally impossible to tell the history of eSports without South Korea. *Starcraft* became very popular in South Korea

[23] "Latency refers to the time required for a signal to go from a transmitter to a receiver, although some use latency to refer to the round trip from transmitter to receiver, and back to receiver, namely the round trip" (DeMuro).

[24] "Ping in computers actually refers to the signal sent out across the network to another computer, and this other computer then sends its own signal back, which is another ping. The measurement of this round trip then gets referred to as latency" (DeMuro).

through PC bangs. PC bangs are 24/7 locations specifically designed for video gaming where customers can pay by the hour. As Collis posits, "PC bang culture mirrored English pinball halls or Californian arcades. But unlike these antecedents, the digitally interconnected and population-dense city of Seoul created intense network effects" (Loc 841). The networked difference between American arcades and South Korean PC bangs is integral to understanding how eSports rose. Arcades functioned through localized competition; players would often try to attain the high score on a particular machine against players who were, generally, from the same area. PC bangs provided a space for players to communicate strategy *and* play against players in other locations. According to T.L. Taylor, South Korea recognized the cultural significance of PC bangs and the social aspect of gaming and wanted to capitalize on the chance to push technological innovation. Taylor highlights multiple initiatives that helped establish modern eSports such as, but not limited to, the Cultural Industry Promotion Law that classified the game industry as a cultural industry, the Private investment promotion that encouraged game investments led by private investors, the establishment of the Operation of Korea Game Development and Promotion Institute that helps develop game technology and provides information, and the Korea Media Rating board that publishes reports on the gaming industry and classifies game products similar to the American classifications of "E" – "for everyone," "T" – "for teen," and "M" – "for mature."

These initiatives helped establish the World Cyber Games (WCG) (2000) which is colloquially known as the "Olympics of professional computer gaming" (Taylor 35). Not only is it still rare for eSports to have governmental support, but the level of corporate involvement for the WCG was, until recently, unique as well. The WCG included major corporations like Samsung while it was not until the recent years eSports outside of South

Korea saw an increased level of sponsorships. The WCG held the "world's first international eSports competition" in 2001 that included *Starcraft* (WCG). They held yearly tournaments from 2000 to 2014 around the world from Seoul, South Korea to San Francisco, California and the WCG was known as the biggest eSports tournament globally during this time. However, the 2014 WCG tournament was cancelled for unknown reasons, but fans often speculate that the tournament failed because of economic shortcomings (Custer; Arora). The WCG returned in 2019 with the help of the Chinese government which is where the tournament was hosted. The WCG offered competitive gaming in *DOTA2*, *Clash Royale*, *Honor of Kings*, and *Warcraft III: The Frozen Throne* (Zhang). However, the tournament did not include heavyweights of eSports, *Call of Duty*, *Counter Strike: Global Offensive* (*CS:GO*), *League of Legends*, and other titles.

During the rise of the WCG, another important system of eSports began to emerge: streaming. In 2007 Justin Kan, Kyle Vogt, Michael Seibel, and Emmet Shear launched *Justin.tv* with the goal of livestreaming. While YouTube had been around for two years by this point, *Youtube.com* functioned more as a repository for videos on demand (VOD) than a place for live-action videos. YouTube has since expanded their platform to include a livestream function, but the initial livestream began with *Justin.tv*. Video game streaming became so popular that the subchannel of *Justin.tv*, *Twitch.tv*, became a separate entity in 2011 and in 2014, *Justin.tv* was closed so the company could focus solely on Twitch (Kumparak). Twitch still remains one of the most popular streaming websites globally but some competition does exist. For example, the WCG streams their events on *Afreecatv.com*, *ggstreams.tv*, *Twitch.tv*, *YouTube.com*, *Facebook.com*, *Tik Tok*, *nimo.tv*, *Huya.com*, and other regionally defined/favored networks. The primary streams for computer gaming in the United

States are Twitch, YouTube, and individually-sponsored streams by game creators. But in the same way that the 1997 Red Annihilation tournament introduced eSports to the nation, it has largely been Twitch that brought streaming to the masses.

League as an eSport

The same year Twitch became its own platform, *League of Legends* hosted their first championship at DreamHack, a digital festival in Sweden with a prize pool of $100,000. The scale of audience and prize pool has generally only scaled upwards since their first world championship. It is also worth noting that *League*'s increase in popularity came during the time of WCG's downfall. This may explain *League*'s absence from the 2019 WCG despite the inclusion of *League*'s in-genre competitor, *DOTA2*. Reportedly, 15 million people played *League* globally in 2011 and approximately 1.7 million viewers watched the World Championship that same year (Henningson; Mitchell). Those statistics are negligible compared to modern numbers. The 2019 *League of Legends* World Championship brought in more than 100 million viewers (Webb). Business Insider recognized *League* as the most popular eSport game in the industry (Webb). Meanwhile, the North American *League* Championship Series (LCS) saw record-breaking numbers in viewership ("Behind the Numbers: A Record-Breaking 2020 LCS Summer Split").

A steady increase in viewership is not all that changed around the *League* eSports scene: celebrities rose, formats changed, some leagues were franchised, and scandals ensued. Within *League* eSports each region has its own professional league. The most well-known leagues are the LCS, LEC, LCK, and LPL and each are tied to their home region, North America, Europe, South Korea, and China, respectively. Regional celebrities have also established themselves through competitive gameplay and dominance. The majority of

League's World Championships have been won by South Korean teams. The most winningest team in *League*'s history is SKT T1 which has since rebranded to Telecom 1 (T1). Season two the Taipei Assassins, a Taiwanese team, upset the South Korean representatives. The South Korean representatives won from 2013 to 2017 with SKT winning in 2013, 2015, and 2016. The Chinese representatives have won the tournament in 2018 and 2019 in Invictus Gaming and FunPlus Phoenix, respectively.[25] The season one championship has an asterisk next to it for some players since it was not truly a "world" championship because it only included North America, Europe, and other "minor" regions as designated by Riot Games (Thooorin_2).

However, the most famous *League* player is T1's mid-laner, Lee "Faker" Sang-hyeok. Faker is widely considered the greatest *League* player to have ever played the game despite not always being considered the best at any given moment (Schmidt). In the same way traditional sports fans might ask "Who is the Michael Jordan of (insert sport)?" viewers of eSports have asked "Who is the Faker of (*CS:GO*, *Overwatch*, *DOTA2*, and other eSports)?" (totaleclipzz; TheRik01; SenKaiten). Reportedly, Faker's celebrity status has, in part, caused South Korea to consider modifying their conscription law that requires all South Korean citizens to participate in their military because of his contribution to South Korea's global image (Lupasco). The story of *League*'s eSports can be summarized through two pictures:

[25] While official statistics have not been published, the Korean representatives, Damwon Gaming, won the 2020 World Championship on 31OCT20.

Fig. 2 (Top): 2011 Championship (Porter) Fig. 3 (bottom): 2019 Championship (Starkey)

Despite Riot Games' ability to successfully navigate the emerging eSport scene, they have a fair amount of scandals and controversial moments. In 2014, Riot Games drafted a contract that stated all players paid by Riot Games (all professional players) were not allowed to stream specific games during their off time (Tassi). As Paul Tassi identifies, streaming was a popular source of extra income for professional players when salaries were not high. While *League*'s professional players played *League* for the majority of their stream, this contract tried to limit players to only streaming *League*. Not only did this outrage fans, but it also begged the question of legal authority over players and streaming. The contract was amended to state that "players are not allowed to be paid by companies directly to promote games on stream" (Tassi).

The second major controversy in *League*'s eSport scene revolves around Maria "Remilia" Creveling and her team, Renegades. Remilia is "the only woman – and only transgender woman – to compete in the LoL Championship Series (LCS)" to date (Seiner). Within the context of this controversy there is a lot of speculation among fans because Riot Games acts as judge and jury, so a lot of information has been kept private. So, this retelling can only discuss what has been reported and I will leave speculation for a more official report. The *Chicago Tribune* reports the live comment sections during Remilia's professional games "were flooded with sexist and transphobic harassment" and "fans disputed her gender identity, wrote critically about her appearance and bashed her abilities" (Seiner). Not only did Riot Games not react to this commentary, but the lack of an official union for players allowed for a dangerous atmosphere for players. In Remilia's case, former-team owner, who is now permanently banned from the league, Chris Badawi was found guilty, among other things, of compromising player welfare and safety (Roberts; InsomniacAndroid). In now

hidden tweets, Remilia blames Badawi for a botched gender reassignment and permanent damage to her "pelvic area" (Roberts; InsomniacAndroid). This surgery occurred in Thailand at Badawi's behest and was not a part of any official document. Riot Games' failure in establishing team-provided healthcare requirements for players (which occurred in 2017, a year after this incident), self-patrolling the practices of the league's teams in lieu of an official governing body, and lack of action in response to fan harassment may have further normalized hegemonic masculinity at the expense of any who did not fit a perpetuated definition. Recently, T1 began exploring legal action to combat harassment against their own players, but Riot Games has remained relatively quiet concerning fan-player harassment (Samples).

The final major controversy regarding gender in *League* occurred outside of North America. In early 2019, the Russian professional scene (LCL) promoted an all-female *League* team "as an 'experiment' to see how they will fare in the league" (Sacco). According to Sacco, Vaevictis Gaming, the all-female team, lost their first three matches with a combined score line of 84 and 4. This means for every kill secured in-game by Vaevictis Gaming their team tallied 21 deaths. For reference, the average kills per game in *League*'s 2019 Worlds Championship was 27 ("World Championship 2019"). Vaevictis Gaming's numbers are essentially doubled compared to other teams. The Vaevictis Gaming roster consisted of Diamond-level players (roughly the top 0.05% of players on the server) against Challenger-level players (roughly the top 0.02% of players on the server), so one-sided games were expected and continued through the entire season as they ended 0-19 overall.

A different controversy rose from this publicity stunt. On February 16th Vaevictis Gaming faced ROX in official gameplay. During the "pick/ban" phase where teams

strategically prevent teams from picking five champions while also carefully picking their five champions for their own players, ROX banned five champions that are normally considered as support champions. As discussed in the last chapter, the support role is often the stereotypical role that females play. Riot Games officially warned ROX of apparent gender discrimination, arguing that despite "it … not technically against the rules, both Riot Games and the broader League of Legends community took this as a sign of disrespect towards the Vaevictis Esports team" ("Disciplinary Solution: ROX and Vega Squadron"). Following this ruling, other LCL teams and the community supported ROX. In an LCL match between DZM and EPG the teams banned ten support champions and no official warning or decision was made against either team. A lack of response from Riot Games concerning competitive integrity highlights one of the key issues with their warning towards ROX. One viable strategy in the "pick/ban" is to target ban either a strong role or a strong player, so if ROX decided that Vaevictis Gaming's support was worthy of being target banned their strategy makes sense. The lack of consistency in Riot Games' punishments illuminates how gender stereotypes inform their judgement. Their original warning claims ROX's actions discriminated against Vaevictis Gaming based on their gender, but Riot Games did not take action against teams that violated competitive integrity. Inadvertently, Riot Games supported gender discrimination by selectively punishing teams. Furthermore, this situation is only complicated by the fact that all of Vaevictis Gaming primarily played the support role before joining the team (Olivia R.). Since this game, multiple of the support-champions banned by ROX have been played in other roles, and while this was not likely to occur because of the meta of the game, it was still a possibility.[26] Ultimately, Riot Games

[26] "Meta" is short for metagame which signifies out-of-game information being used for the game. In *League*, a "meta" is often discussed as a combination of champion selection, tempo of gameplay, and

supported the stereotype that females may only play support champions because they did not take action against other teams who banned all support champions, they ignored the fact that Vaevictis's players actually play the banned champions, and imposed an official ruling that, in their own omission, technically did not break rules.

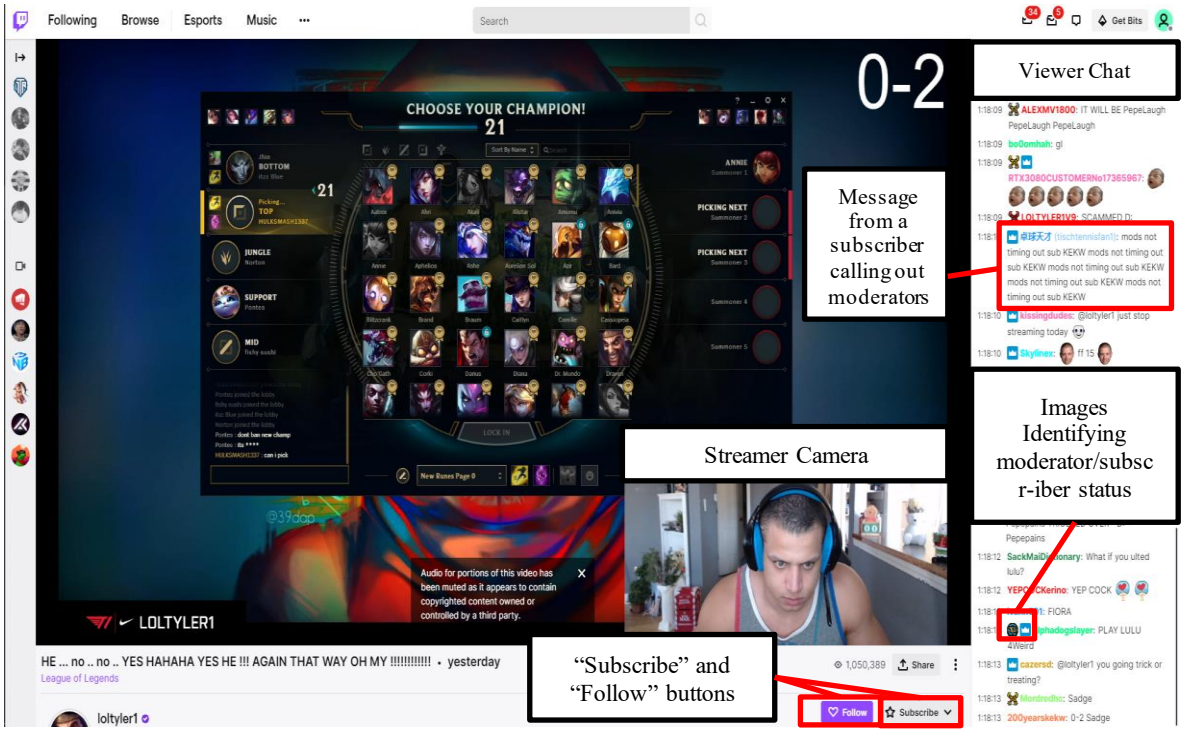
Identification: A Story of Streaming

Now that a baseline history has been provided, a deeper analysis of identification within streaming communities on Twitch is possible. While the examples within this section are specific to *League*, previous, limited studies have argued streaming is highly gendered (Nakandala et al.), so the arguments regarding identification between streamers, viewers, and gameplay may extend towards other streams. In order to understand how identification may occur in streaming communities, it is first important to understand how streaming websites function. *Twitch.tv* hosts many games with each streamer hosting a "channel." Within each channel, a viewer may obtain multiple status'. Every Twitch account is a viewer, but users may "subscribe" to any streamer for a monthly fee or "follow" for free. Typically, subscribing unlocks special benefits to the stream such as customized emotes or events the streamer might do that excludes non-subscribers. Following a channel does not typically unlock benefits, but viewers receive an email or application notification when the followed streamer begins their stream. Subscriptions, advertisements, and sponsors are the primary way streamers receive income from their stream. Details of streamer-twitch payments are contractually kept quiet so a streamer's exact revenue is never known.

tactics. This combination helps define "optimal play" at any given time. Given the nature of the game and bi-monthly changes, the meta can shift rapidly. Players also find counter strategies to current meta, so whatever is "meta" may change.

Another status that exists within each stream is the "mod" status. Streamers may promote a viewer to moderator. The moderator status varies in power by stream but most moderators are responsible for patrolling the text-chat for any rule-breaking behavior. While Twitch's terms of service provide expectations the enforcement of rules also vary between streamers. For instance, popular streamer "Kaceytron" and her moderators do not punish viewers regardless of what they say (Nakandala et al.). Kaceytron is an exception to the majority of female streamers, because she satirically fulfills the female-stereotype of streamers. Nakandala et al. found that less-popular streamers also moderate their channel more than more-popular streamers. Moderation often comes in the form of text-chat. The text-chat box is the primary method of communication for viewers to other viewers and to the streamer. Most large streams also allow for a message to appear on stream for a small donation. The streamer typically responds through voice-chat since most streamers have a camera display and a microphone although they may respond in chat.

Fig. 4: Screenshot of "Tyler1" and his stream



The game or event that is streamed directly impacts streamer-viewer interactions. Games that require less attention (*Minecraft* (2011); *RuneScape* (2001)) afford greater interaction than games like *League*, *DOTA2*, or the *Call of Duty* franchise. While optimal play demands the attention of the player, streamers are afforded certain times during *League* gameplay to interact with their stream; some of the affordances are how each game takes three to five minutes to start, the increased death timers as the game extends, and trivial aspects of the game like walking to a desired location. A common occurrence after each game is for a streamer to acknowledge and thank viewers for each donation they missed during gameplay.

In "The Role of Wishful Identification, Emotional Engagement, and Parasocial Relationships in Repeated Viewing of Live-Streaming Games: A Social Cognitive Theory Perspective," Lim et al. argues that viewer interaction increases wishful identification with the streamer and emotional engagement with other viewers. Wishful identification can be defined as a "psychological process through which an individual desires or attempts to become like another person" (Hoffner and Buchanan 327). Within the context of *League*, one of the most popular streamers is Tyler "Tyler1" Steinkamp. Originally, his fame began because of his aggressive stream-persona and he encouraged "running it down mid" when things did not go his way. While streaming, he would play his favorite champion, Draven, and when mad at teammates, he would click the enemy "mid" tower and let the enemy kill him multiple times. His fanbase eventually imitated his actions through "running it down" while playing Draven.

There are multiple levels of identification occurring within this example. Players identify as Tyler1 in moments of frustration while playing Draven so frequently that the

champion becomes synonymous with this tactic (Fullsteel_Ish). Tyler1's in-game actions also spurred the creation of the *League* club (as discussed last chapter) titled 'Run down mid tyler 1' (RDMT1) (zaetrod). Regardless of a player's in-game actions, other players may associate them with Tyler1's and his fans' actions. These series of actions fostered an atmosphere among players that allowed for greater tension: a player who identifies with Tyler1 through the club tag or through Draven may not be identified in a way that matches their sense of identity. When a teammate notices the club tag or that the player selects Draven, they may be identified as Tyler1 and not as a separate player. This method of identification impacts the gameplay experience as well. When players perform similar to popular streamers, they may be asked "Is that Tyler1?" or another streamer. So, not only does a streamer's community imitate the streamer through identity, but their reputation also acts as a form of identification for other players. There is always the chance that players believe another player *is* Tyler1. The anonymity of *League* affords streamers the ability to play on an alternate account. While this may be rare, it is a possibility.

Tyler1 amassed twenty-two banned accounts before he received a message from Riot Games in 2016 that he was "among 0.006% of League players egregiously negative enough to be permanently banned" (Plunkett). On top of "intentionally feeding," that is dying on purpose and usually out of spite, Tyler1 had a report history of abusive language. The community was split regarding his punishment, citing other streamers who were equal or worse than Tyler1 in negative behavior. Despite his ban, Tyler1's fans remained active in *League*. The wishful identification of Tyler1 persisted despite his required departure from the game. Eventually, Tyler1 shifted his persona to satire while playing other games on Twitch

and Riot Games unbanned him in 2018. Tyler1's return stream saw a peak of over 380,000 viewers (Allen).

While the stigma around him intentionally feeding has faded away, some fans still question his level of reformation. Draven is known as one of the most arrogant champions in *League* based on his backstory and voice lines (Cocke). For example, one of his in-game cosmetics adds a larger model of his head to his body; he is literally big-headed in the change his cosmetic. This arrogance combined with Tyler1's hyper-masculine identity only supports Ruvalcaba et al.'s findings of the gendered differences in spectatorship. Since "stream communities form around a shared identity drawn from the stream's content and the shared experiences of its participants" Tyler1's self-identified "alpha" behavior shapes the community in his image (Hamilton et al. 1316; Tyler1). Ruvalcaba et al. suggest that "male gamers may engage in sexual harassment to bolster their own masculinity," so Tyler1's emphasis on masculinity may lead, for those missing the satire, to increased sexual harassment and other negative behaviors in-game, in other streams, or in real-life (308).

In fact, Nakandala et al. found that female streamers face a significant amount of sexual harassment compared to male counterparts. Their study found that female-streamer chats often contained more gendered language and sexualized language, while male-streamer chats were often filled with more language that pertained to the game. While this study acknowledges streamers criticizing the stereotype like Kaceytron, and streamers who use the stereotypes to gain popularity, it fails to account for these streams in their results. It is inarguable that "*conversation in Twitch is strongly gendered*," yet it is still unclear how this impacts the formation of identification in/between viewers or how these gendered interactions impact gameplay (Nakandala et al. 12, original emphasis).

There remains another relationship worthy of investigation in identification and identity in streaming: the viewer-to-viewer relationship. In terms of streaming, emotional engagement may be understood as a viewer's emotional connection with other viewers (Lim et al.). This connection may include an exchange of emotive reactions that either concur or oppose. Lim et al. found that "emotional engagement is tied more to personal and feelings of pleasure" and that "emotional engagement was shown to eventually lead to channel loyalty" (164; 165).

However, identification may also create tension between viewers and players. Given the various methods of identification discussed last chapter – identification *with* and identification *as* – viewers may have a difficult time establishing an accurate identity within the channel. While on Twitch, viewers are represented by their self-created username, but the tension I refer to is the disconnect between viewers and streamer that may occur based on an assumed relationship. Dibble et al. defines the parasocial relationship as a "media user's reaction to a media performer such that the media user perceives the performer as an intimate conversational partner" that occurs over multiple instances (21). More clearly, the parasocial relationship occurs when the viewer interprets a relationship between themselves and the streamer based on repeated interactions over time, but the streamer does not return that relationship. Lim et al. found in "The Role of Wishful Identification, Emotional Engagement, and Parasocial Relationships in Repeated Viewing Of Live-Streaming Games: A Social Cognitive Theory Perspective" that there is a positive relationship between emotional engagement and the parasocial relationship. This means that higher levels of emotional engagement a viewer experiences increases their parasocial relationship with the streamer. Similarly, the lack of emotional engagement among viewers prevents the formation of a

parasocial relationship. However, they failed to consider the impact of this interconnectedness. While maintaining their parasocial relationship with a streamer, viewers' types of identification may change based on moments of disidentification against other viewers. For example, viewers of Tyler1 may disagree with him "running it down mid" while also agreeing with his self-identified 'alpha' attitude. An opposing viewer might hold different beliefs, but since Tyler1 has displayed both attitudes, both viewers may identify with Tyler1 while simultaneously experiencing disidentification with each other. Furthermore, tensions may arise when intergroup conflict arises because of this disidentification. Some of Tyler1's viewers have already encountered these conflicts. A change in viewer identification destroyed the parasocial relationship before their emotional engagement could help secure brand loyalty (domjii; Cleary; emarythomp; Geddes). This tension has, so far, resulted in either a public acknowledgement of the issue by viewers or "unsubscribing" from his Twitch channel.

The Competitive Side of Streaming

The lack of personal interaction between viewer and streamer in a professional eSports stream prevents the formation of a parasocial relationship, however, the professional stream has two unique challenges that individual streamers do not face. First, they introduce new rules to the game that exist only within the professional context. Within the context of the professional game, Riot Games created additional rules that "amateur," or an everyday player, are not held to. For example, the professional game "pick/ban" phase functions differently. While both instances allow each team five bans, the amateur "pick/ban" is streamlined to expedite gameplay. Whereas the professional "pick/ban" is better designed for coordinated strategy and viewer experience. More official rules exist within the LCS rule-

book for instance, players must be at least 17-years-old to qualify for professional play or professional players must be at least Diamond 1 in rank within a year prior ("2020 official Rules"). Since an eSports stream often includes casters, analysts, and other personnel that do not directly interact with viewers, the previously assumed relationship dissipates. Instead, viewers only experience an emotional engagement with other viewers that prevents similar identification formed in an amateur streaming.

Second, "information asymmetry" is an aspect that streamers do not interact with but is required of the developers of an eSport game. Cheung and Huang define information asymmetry as "the imbalance of information between the player and spectator, where due to the game design, one party is privy to some information and the other is not" (769). Cheung and Huang provide three forms of information asymmetry: information known to the players but not the viewer, information unknown to players and viewer, and information known to the viewer but not the player. They argue that this information increases tension among viewers that help keep the eSport entertaining. Since parasocial relationships are not possible between streamer and viewer, proper use of information asymmetry may help create the same brand loyalty Lim et al. analyze.

Cheung and Huang also introduce the "*circles of watching*" when discussing viewership. This notion places the text at the center of a collection of circles. They argue that subsequent circles represent a different level of performance. After the text, the work of broadcasters exists and then the crowd. While investigating viewer positionality in reference to the 'magic circle' they determine that "the Crowd engages in little performances, trying to out-commentate the official commentators with their own analysis and prediction, or stirring the emotions of their peers, and other reactionary performances" (768). So, while the

parasocial relationship is not possible, emotional engagement is still possible and even required as part of the co-laboring in spectatorship (768). During this co-laboring, identities form among viewers. Instead of revolving around the parasocial relationship between viewer and individual streamer, these identities form based on the "little performances" viewers participate in. Furthermore, it may be inferred that these communities resemble individual streaming communities in function but interact with a separate experience since the game's rules have changed. Formally, it may be argued that eSports identifies *with* but not *as* its amateur counterpart as they are not an exact replica.

AITA?

The entirety of this thesis begs the following questions concerning identification and representation: What is "good" representation? How should games acknowledge differing existences? How does representation and identification impact gameplay? How is identification formed during streaming? How does viewer-identity influence gameplay? How do viewer-identities interact and coexist? However, there remains one final question: What does this mean moving forward?

The comparison between eSports and traditional sports will likely continue. This is particularly true given the push for eSports to be included in the Olympic Games. While the 2020 Olympics were canceled because of COVID-19, eSports found itself in an advantageous position to continue despite the ongoing pandemic. Despite this flexibility in scheduling, Kruthika N.S. argues that eSports cannot be included in the Olympics until the gender divide is sufficiently handled. However, as this chapter has highlighted, females are often marginalized both in video games and in the video game industry. Ruvalcaba et al. argue that the gendered differences may even drive females away from competitive

gameplay. As Kruthika N.S. highlights, these are the differences that do not align with the IOC's goal of increased inclusivity. In order for eSports to be recognized by the IOC, these issues must be resolved.

While systemic issues prove difficult to "solve," United States Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas recently published a 10-page comment regarding the court's denial of the petition for a writ of certiorari. The comment highlighted historical interpretations regarding the 1996 Communications Decency Act. Section 230 has two important subsections worth consideration.

> 230(c)(1): "No provider or user of an interactive computer service shall be treated as the publisher or speaker of any information provided by another information content." (47 U.S. Code § 230)
>
> 230(c)(2): "No computer service provider 'shall be held liable' for (A) good-faith acts to restrict access to, or remove, certain types of objectionable content; or (B) giving consumers tools to filter the same types of content." (47 U.S. Code § 230)

Justice Thomas argues that these subsections are fundamental in understanding the broad applicability of section 230. He highlights the gradual shift, through a series of court decisions, of the court's interpretation from providing immunity for a company if they unknowingly publish illegal third-party content or if the party takes down third-party content "in good faith" towards a protection of "*any* decision to edit or remove content" regardless of intentionality (7). He asserts that "with no limits on an Internet company's discretion to take down material, 230 now apparently protects companies who racially discriminate in removing content" (7). Importantly, Justice Thomas does not call for an immediate

declaration of a singular correct interpretation, but he does suggest that 230 has been used too broadly.

Within the context of Twitch, 230 currently protects the site from civil lawsuits that may occur because of streamers. Twitch participates in "good faith" moderation of their website by providing community guidelines. For example, Twitch's updated guidelines specifically requires that streamers "cover the area extending from [their] hips to the bottom of [their] pelvis and buttocks" area ("Update"). Their guidelines also patrol the videos and images that streamers showcase. Popular streamer Imane "Pokimane" Anys was subject to a temporary suspension because of linked pornographic content (Samples). Despite this self-moderation and "good faith" effort, Twitch often receives backlash because of seemingly inconsistent punishments. Natalia "Alinity" Mogollon, another female streamer, is a known animal abuser as she constantly endangers her cat during live broadcasts. One of the more serious incidents includes Alinity spitting vodka into her cat's mouth (Alinity). Despite a tweet from the People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) calling for the immediate removal of Alinity from Twitch, arguing that she promotes animal abuse, it took a "wardrobe malfunction" that exposed her nipple for her to be suspended for one day (Henry).

In short, Twitch's "good-faith" efforts exemplify the need to address Justice Thomas's comment. When considering rampant discrimination through markers of difference as this thesis interrogates, notions of freedom of speech and who holds authorial, editorial, and/or publishing liability should be considered in relation to how those systemic issues are supported or subverted. The scope of this paper does not consider the benefits or negatives of restructuring 230, but it is clear that current structures of power fail in preventing the ongoing marginalization of certain demographics.

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